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MISS PROVIDENCE

A NOVEL

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

AUTHOR OF
AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE, THE RICH MISS RIDDELL,
A QUEEN OF CURDS AND CREAM,
ETELKA'S VOW, ETC.

Longard de Longarde (Dorothea Gerard)

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MISS PROVIDENCE.

CHAPTER I.

A CHILD OF LUCK.

"WELL, Miss Providence, and whose affairs have you been setting right to-day, if I may ask? Found any willing subjects, eh? Or do they still refuse to be made happy?"

There were only four people seated at the dinner-table, and only one woman among the four. The woman was Florence Crossley, the elder man present was her father, the younger one her *fiancé* of exactly a week's standing, while the one that came in the middle was of no consequence whatever, being only Mr. Hughes, the vicar, whom Mr. Crossley had asked in order to have somebody to talk to, in case Sir Louis Hepburne should have anything to say to Flo which would be better said *en tête-à-tête*. This clerical gooseberry was more than half bald, stoutish, and so full to overflowing of Christian charity that he might be said to drip with it—the sort of man who says to every person he meets, "How *are* you?" with an intensity of expression and accent which seems to imply that the question has been weighing on his mind for

months, and then heaves a deep-felt sigh of relief on being informed that you are in your usual health.

The other three members of the *partie carrée* were each in their way striking figures, Mr. Crossley, the host, being perhaps the most striking of all, by virtue of his beautiful white head—a head of which the whole county was proud, as of some Art treasure which was common property. And, truly, the delicate, close-cropped curls—which had indeed grown thinner with age, but not less curly—as well as the richly flowing beard, were of so fine a texture that they gave the impression of being some wonderful piece of filigree work, wrought in the purest and most costly silver. A still upright and graceful figure, a suave address, and the bearing of a courtier rather than of a country squire, were the only things that could have carried out the idea of that head, and all these things Mr. Crossley possessed.

His future son-in-law was a different sort of man altogether, a grand-looking, rather than a good-looking, young fellow, with somewhat large features and magnificent limbs. The first impression he gave was one of squareness and straightness—square in the shoulders, square in the forehead, a little too square in the chin, remarkably straight in the back, as well as in the dense eyebrows. It was eminently a calm face, but with something in the deep cut of the nostril which suggested the possibility of passion, and with a pair of steady brown eyes which took no side-glances, but either looked full and rather too hard at the thing within their ken, or else did not look at all.

There is only Florence left to talk about, but there

is more to say about her than about the others, seeing that the reader will expect to hear not only all about her complexion and her hair, but also about her dress —in the other three cases fortunately a superfluous detail. Even in this case the subject is circumscribed, seeing that it was a family dinner-party, and that therefore a black lace dress, with only a diamond ornament in her dark-brown hair, and the very first rose of the season at her breast, had been considered most appropriate, particularly as she happened to know that Louis liked her best in black. Some people called her beautiful; others, again, said that her mouth was too large, and her nose not straight enough; possibly they were right, but those critics were generally the mothers of plain daughters, and even they could not deny that her figure was perfect, and that the clear, warm colour in her cheek was not to be matched within the county.

Her father's address had made the colour a little warmer than usual, for it was not quite after her taste. Whenever he began by calling her "Miss Providence," she knew the sort of thing to expect. Tenderly as she loved him, there was no denying the fact that he did not take her quite seriously enough—not nearly so seriously as she took herself.

"It is Tom Leake's affairs I have been setting right to-day," she replied, distinctly and a trifle defiantly.

"Trying to, you mean," threw in Sir Louis, *sotto voce*.

Florence raised her eyes from her plate, and gave him a look which said quite plainly, "Are *you*, too, going to join the mockers?"

It was met by a glance which was not in the least mocking, but which caused the colour in her cheek to rise by another shade. When Florence looked up suddenly, as she had an unconscious trick of doing, she always caused a certain sensation of surprise—not so much because her eyes were so beautiful and so earnest, but because, instead of being dark, as one somehow expected them to be, they were a rather light grey, though thickly fringed with black. Even people who had known her from childhood were subject to this feeling of surprise. Sir Louis could only recall two instances of dark-haired women with exactly this shade of grey eyes. One, indeed, had not been a woman, but a little girl, the sister of a school-fellow at Harrow; the other, a peasant woman whom, while travelling on the Continent, he had passed on the road, trudging wearily along with a burden on her back, and with downcast black lashes. She, also, had raised her eyes unexpectedly as he passed, and also had surprised him by the clearness of her grey eyes. He had never seen her before or since, just as he had never again met his school-fellow's sister, but the feeling of pleasurable surprise had remained with him as an agreeable recollection. In some way which he could not explain, this unusual combination of tints happened to satisfy something within him; and from the moment that he had found these same eyes in Florence Crossley, he had never doubted that here lay his fate.

"And what has Tom Leake been doing?" asked Mr. Crossley, looking at his daughter with almost as admiring a gaze as Sir Louis, but with the suspicion of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"It is what he is *not* doing that is wrong. For

six weeks past I have been trying to persuade him to adopt those two nephews of his, whose stepmother is so unkind to them. It's clearly his duty."

"But surely Leake has five or six children of his own?" asked her father, still with that half-teasing, half-tender smile of his.

"Six. But that can't alter his duty. He is much better off than his brother was, and it can't be fair that the children of one brother should starve while those of the other live in plenty."

"Considering that one brother was a drunkard and the other a first-rate workman——" began Mr. Crossley.

"That has nothing to do with the children. Why should they suffer for their parents' sins? I *know* I shall get Tom to listen to me, just as I know that I shall get Lizzie Bond to accept Bill Tester, who has made her two offers of marriage. Nothing could be more perfect, for she is quite comfortably off, while he hasn't got a penny."

"Rather an unusual reason for accepting a man, surely," remarked Sir Louis. "Perhaps Lizzie is looking out for somebody as comfortably off as herself."

"I *hope* not! This would be so much nicer; such a much fairer division of things; and I feel sure they are made for each other."

"Then why not leave them to fight it out unassisted?"

"She wouldn't be Miss Providence if she did that," laughed Mr. Crossley, softly.

Florence gave an impatient sigh. "I wish you weren't so matter-of-fact, Louis! When people won't

see what is best for them, there is nothing for it but to show them. I have asked Mr. Hughes to help me in persuading Lizzie, but he won't."

The vicar smiled deprecatingly. "I should be charmed to see Lizzie happily settled, but I fear I don't possess the requisite qualities for a match-maker. The fact is, I—I shrink from the responsibility."

"I am quite willing to take that upon myself," said Florence, with a slightly scornful uplifting of her red lip. "All I ask is that you should not work against me."

The idea of the vicar working against anybody was so irresistible, that everybody at the table, including the vicar himself, began to laugh.

It was about ten minutes after Florence had left the room that Mr. Crossley observed innocently to Sir Louis, "Louis, my boy, it strikes me that this is rather hard upon Flo. You seem to have done with your wine, so I dare say you won't mind stepping over and keeping her company while Mr. Hughes and I get to the end of this decanter."

"High time to put him out of pain," observed the host as Louis closed the door behind him. "No time to say good-bye to-morrow morning, you know; off by the six a. m. This has been a farewell feast, you know."

"It is the first separation, is it not?" asked the vicar, with a sympathy so deep-felt that it positively brought a little moisture to his eyes.

"The first; and it's to last a whole week—an awful stretch of time, I can tell you, when one's engagement is exactly another week old."

"And he brings his poor dear mother back with him?"

"Yes. He means to turn that old robber-nest into a home; and with his money and his energy, it is just possible that he may succeed."

"It is a perfect match," murmured the vicar, heaving a sigh of tremulous satisfaction.

Meanwhile Sir Louis had, without difficulty, found his way to the drawing-room. Here there was as yet no light, except that given on the one hand by the glow of a fire in the grate, and on the other by the stars looking in through the French window, which stood open to the terrace—winter and summer touching hands for a moment as they cross on their way.

On the terrace, whither Sir Louis's instinct led him, Florence, with a light wrap about her shoulders, was sauntering about and doing her best to persuade herself that the night was not chilly. There was nothing said immediately on either side. Silently Sir Louis joined her, drawing her hand softly within his arm, and silently the walk was continued for several minutes more, during which the chill of this English May night ceased to exist for at least two people, dispelled by that subtle warmth in the blood which most of us have felt at least once in a lifetime.

At last, with a deep, tremulously happy sigh, Florence stood still and laid her arms upon the stone balustrade.

"And it must really be to-morrow?" she asked a little dreamily.

"It really must. I cannot keep my poor mother waiting any longer, and I cannot let her travel with-

out me. I long to see her face, Flo. She has waited for this for so long! This going away is awful, but, darling, you mustn't persuade me out of it; it has to be done."

"I know it has to be done," said Florence, looking straight in front of her towards where the thickly wooded park showed in dark blotches against the transparent sky; "and I don't want to persuade you out of it. In fact, it is almost better if you go away for a little."

"Had a little more of me lately than you can quite stand?" suggestetd Sir Louis, with a good-humoured laugh.

She turned her head and gave him one of her swift glances—a glance of almost too grave a reproof for the occasion.

"You *know* I don't mean that," she said in a low tone, looking again towards the tree-masses.

"Then, Flo, I wish you would tell me what you *do* mean," said Sir Louis, more gravely. "You have struck me lately as being disturbed. There isn't anything wrong, is there?"

"No there is nothing wrong."

"And you are quite certain that you are happy?"

She was silent for a second, then, turning quickly towards him, laid her hand upon his sleeve.

"Oh, Louis, don't you understand? That is just it; it is exactly my happiness that frightens me—it is too great."

"You mean that you think it's bound to come to an end? Well, the Greeks had a recipe for disarming the envy of the gods, you know. If you

feel as uneasy as all that, why not follow old what's-his-name's example, and chuck a ring into the duck-pond?"

Florence shook her head. "No, no, that is not what I mean. Of course it will last, I know it will; all the good things always last with me; I have never had a wish crossed since I was born; my paper boats always floated, and my dolls never lost their eyes. They say I am a child of luck. It isn't that I am afraid of."

"Of what, then?" asked Sir Louis, wonderingly.

"I hardly know myself, but I am quite sure it *can't* be intended that human beings should be as happy as we are *à la longue*."

Sir Louis was frivolous enough to laugh.

"I don't know about that, but I'm at least equally sure that it can't be intended that human beings should worry because things happen to be going straight for a bit."

"If it was only for a bit, that would be nothing; but with me they have been going right all my life. Have I not got everything, positively everything, that anybody need have: health, money, position, my dear old dad, and now *you* to make all perfect? Really it seems too much for one person."

"We are two people," interpolated Sir Louis, without being heeded.

"I assure you, Louis, I have moments when it seems to me that it can't be right to be so outrageously fortunate as I am; it does seem so horribly selfish when there is so much misery, so much unhappiness all around."

"Isn't it a trifle early to begin talking of your

outrageous good fortune? You're eighteen, aren't you?"

"No, it isn't early, because I know it will stick to me to the end; it seems to be my fate."

"Poor girl!" said Sir Louis, still in that light tone. "It comes to this, then: she is unhappy at being so happy."

"Are you laughing at me, Louis?" she asked, with rising colour.

"No, Florence, I am not." He had become serious in one moment. "My noble, foolish girl, I love you all the more for this child's talk; you could not have these thoughts if your heart were not bursting with real goodness, but child's talk it remains all the same. Grown-up men and women know better than to complain of their luck; they take it thankfully where they can get it, and miss it sorely when it leaves them, but they do not play pitch and toss with it, as you seem almost inclined to do. You did not choose your fate for yourself, it was chosen for you, and my belief is that we're all of us bound to take the good and the evil together, exactly as it comes, and make the best of it."

He spoke earnestly, his hand laid upon hers; and Florence, with her elbow upon the balustrade and her chin upon her hand, gazed up abstractedly into his face, listening more to the voice than to the words, and attempting to follow his expression in the half-light. And as she looked and listened, and felt his fingers upon hers, she knew within her heart that whether she wanted to or not she would have to love this man to the very death.

"Kiss me quickly, Louis!" was all the answer

he got when he paused. "I believe papa is coming."

Sir Louis barely saved his distance before Mr. Crossley appeared shivering in the doorway.

"Nothing but that thin rag, Flo?" he exclaimed in horror-stricken accents. "And such a night as this! Upon my word, Louis, if that's the way you're going to look after your wife——"

"But what sort of a night is it?" asked Sir Louis in perfect good faith. "It seemed to me quite pleasant. Were you cold, Flo?"

"Not in the least!" said Flo, exhibiting, as she stepped within the circle of the lamplight, a pair of cheeks that completely bore out the truthfulness of her reply.

"And yet Browne has just told me that he is covering up all the early vegetables," remarked Mr. Crossley, glancing from one young face to the other. "But," he added with a whimsically wistful smile, "I dare say there is something wrong with the thermometer."

Perhaps he was thinking of certain evenings spent upon this very same terrace, and of the little regard he had paid to the thermometer then. But at that time, to be sure, his hair had not been white.

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTION.

When Florence complained of never having had a wish crossed, she spoke almost the literal truth. If she had ever been refused anything, it had been, at the most, certain sweetmeats in the nursery, and by the orders of the doctor, and even this had not been nearly so often as desirable. The only child of a wealthy and devoted father, who cherished her as all that remained to him of a blissful but frightfully brief married life, she had been able from infancy to impose her will on the household. Hers had been an unclouded though somewhat solitary childhood; for Mr. Crossley, who never quite recovered from his premature bereavement, shrank from the society of all but a few intimates, with all the soreness of a sensitive nature that has been wounded to the core. Without being either embittered or soured, he had become like a man who cannot bear the full light. For this reason the trees in the park were allowed to make so thick a screen against the outer world; and for this reason, too, he spent most of his time in his library, pursuing a desultory course of study upon every subject in general and none in particular, which, although leading to no tangible result, gently soothed his

wounded mind, while earning for him the not fully deserved reputation of a philosopher. In time his books became to him nearly as dear as his daughter, whose youthful presence was not always convenient in the library, where from morning to night he sat nursing his grief with a persistency which might be called either selfish or sublime, according to the on-looker's point of view. Under these circumstances, it was but natural that the care of the child's education should be resigned to others.

Florence had passed through the hands of many nurses and governesses, but only one among them had left a mark on her life. This had been a gaunt giantess, with that peculiar shade of dirty-white hair which betrays that it has once been yellow, with lines of care about her hard-set mouth, and an unquenchable fire in her sunken, fiercely blue eyes. Constant buffetings of fate had made of this woman a rebel against the order of the world. It is doubtful whether Mrs. Gillett had ever heard of socialism, and certain that she had never studied it; yet out of her own inner consciousness had she evolved a queer, crooked theory of her own—a sort of caricature of the original article, inspired by her personal misfortunes, and more than half coloured with a fierce religious fanaticism. There was only a given quantity of luck in the world—not in the shape of hard cash only, but in every other shape as well, which, were it but equally divided, would be enough for everybody. She was one of those who had come too short, and ever since she had reached this consciousness had she been filled with bitterness at the injustice of her lot, and envious hatred of the more fortunate. The child in her charge prom-

ised to be one of these fortunates, therefore she hated even her in the abstract; while, viewing her as an individual, this strangely contradictious old woman was unable to keep her heart from yearning over the motherless bairn. These two elements were for ever fighting for the upper hand. One of her great delights was to see the child weep. When on winter evenings they sat before the roaring nursery fire, the small, curly headed figure crouched at the feet of the large, bony frame, it was not with fairy-tales that the time was beguiled, but with merciless, cruelly sad stories of unhappy people pursued by a relentless fate, of wives bereaved of their husbands, of mothers weeping on their children's graves, of honest workers robbed of their hardly earned savings by villains who get off scot-free; and over the edge of the linen she was mending, the blue, hawklike eyes would greedily watch the happy child's face first grow clouded and then convulsed, and when the inevitable burst of tears came she would feel that it was something to have darkened so bright a life for at least one moment, and, flinging the linen aside, she would pull the child upon her knee, press her passionately to her bony breast, and not leave off until she had caressed her back into a gayer mood. A little of her standing grudge against Fate had been paid off in that moment, therefore she could afford to be tender again.

Sometimes the small Flo would ask to whom it was that this or that dreadful thing had happened, and the answer she got was always the same: "It happened to me!" In time she ceased to ask, having got used to the belief that every bad thing which could

happen in the world had inevitably happened to her nurse. But she put other questions.

"Whose fault is it that the poor people are unhappy?" she once asked.

"The rich people's fault."

"But papa is rich," objected Flo; "and I'm sure he has never made anybody unhappy."

Mrs. Gillett gave her own bitter cackle.

"He may not have meant to do so, but he can't help himself. Every rich man or woman is the misfortune of a poor one; for it's to the rich of the world that the luck flies. You, too, will have to be the misfortune of some one or other—be sure of that! Your share of luck is too big for one person alone; others will have to suffer for it."

"How can I be the misfortune of some one else?" asked Flo, perplexed.

"I don't know how; there are many different ways. Perhaps you will get a fortune which some other person expects, or perhaps the man you love will be loved by another woman, whose heart will break when he marries you. Anyway, it is sure to be."

Between the bars of the high safety fender the child gazed with thoughtful eyes into the glowing coals, and turned it all over in her small mind. It was all extremely perplexing, and possibly not quite logical, but it had a strange fascination of its own.

"But rich people can be unhappy also," she observed at last. "They also get ill and die. Even my mamma died."

"Those are the ones that have to pay for their luck in this world instead of in the next. Your papa has paid for his luck," added the old woman in a more

relenting tone of voice. Her master's cruel loss made him appear to her less of a natural enemy than the generality of prosperous people. "But woe to those who go from here with their account unsettled!"

Flo's feelings were a mixture of fearful awe and of passionate pity for the lot of the woman whose outbursts of half savage affection were almost as terrifying as her bitter words. By degrees the wild ideas dropped from those withered lips began to take root in what happened to be a singularly congenial soil. In the long hours for thought afforded by the lonely nursery, these roots struck so deep that even after Mrs. Gillett had left the house their hold did not loosen. She left her influence behind her, as do most people of strong personality.

And thus Florence had grown up, with thoughts that do not come to the majority of girls, and which, with her romantic temperament and somewhat headstrong nature, might possibly lead to strange results. There was no getting rid of the idea that she had got more than her just share of the good things of this world, and apparently no remedy but to try and make other people as happy as she was. It was this thought that had made her into the village matchmaker, the settler of quarrels, the Dame Bountiful whose gifts were strewn broadcast with well-meaning, but not always judicious, liberality; yet remaining conscious all the time that it was not a question of money alone, but also of more subtle elements of happiness, which were for ever escaping her control. A certain vague hankering after personal sacrifices of some sort—a remnant of the idea inculcated before the nursery fire, that it is better to pay for one's luck in this world

than in the next—ran through it all like a perpetual undercurrent, not clearly recognised, but always present.

To her father she avoided speaking directly of these thoughts. Dearly though she loved him, she instinctively knew that in answer to an unrolling of her private theories of life he would only smile benevolently, with that tinge of amiable cynicism which was peculiar to him. Even without explanations, he had guessed enough to smile at what he clearly recognized as follies, yet which he felt no call to correct. He liked his Flo far too well as she was to want her altered; the occasional confessions of faith that escaped her, tickled his fancy far too much to be readily missed. Of course it was just conceivable that harm might come of this idealism run wild, but the stricken widower lived too much in the past ever to take a keen interest in the future. Most young people worth their salt suffered from the desire to set the world right; his child was passing through this stage, that was all, and of course matrimony would cure her of all that. Besides, it would probably have required a good deal of moral energy to correct her ideas, and energy was a thing for which Mr. Crossley had never been remarkable. He knew perfectly well that his daughter's character was far stronger than his own, and for this reason he contented himself with calling her "Miss Providence," and twitting her with the failures she met in attempting to keep the balance of luck straight among her rustic *protégés*. This was much pleasanter and easier to do than arguing about principles. The affectionate mockery was a rather heavy strain upon Florence's not overgreat stock of

patience, while the ideas within her sunk all the deeper for having to be repressed.

Her first meeting with Louis had swept them all from her mind, only to return in double force, with the consciousness that her happiness was accomplished. *Could* it be right to be so perfectly, so blissfully happy as this? A gaunt, witch-like phantom seemed to rise from out of the mists of childhood, and to answer, "No!" An increase of her periodical charities failed to ease her romantic conscience. It was all so absurdly smooth, so ignominiously easy. Her father was delighted with her choice; Louis's relations would of course be equally pleased; everybody she met beamed approval on her—it was, as the vicar had said, "a perfect match." Wealth, health, mutual affection, they had everything they could possibly wish for. Look which way she would, scan the horizon as she might, there was no espying even the tiniest cloud to stain the heaven of her bliss.

CHAPTER III.

CORRY.

And yet, though she knew it not, just beyond that line of horizon there was a tempest gathering.

Exactly at the moment when Florence stood on the terrace, complaining to her future husband of her unbearable good fortune, a conversation was taking place in London, between people whom she had never seen, but who, nevertheless, were destined to gravely influence her life.

The gaslit attic room was occupied by two young women, one of whom lay on a cast-iron bedstead that was too short for her, covered with a defective blanket, and with a bundle of shawls thrust in under the one thin pillow, in which the feverishly working head had almost worn a hole. She was evidently tall, for she could not afford to stretch her legs, and she was evidently thin, for every time she moved the blankets fell into sharp lines, never into soft curves. The flush on her cheek was too bright for the tint of the rest of her face, while half an old towel dipped in cold water had been laid over her forehead, and was continually slipping over her eyes in a manner which suggested a sort of ghostly game at blindman's-buff. The other half of the towel lay soaking

in a basin on a chair close by. It was the second occupant of the room who changed the compresses in the intervals of a supper of ham and eggs, which she had just been frying for herself by aid of the dregs of the coal-scuttle.

She was far too delicate an apparition for the surroundings,—small, slender, with a bird-like vivacity and grace in every movement, with the skin of a wild flower, and a cloud of pale gold hair that looked as though, like thistle down, it might be blown away with a breath, and with large, light blue eyes that moved a little too quickly. The first impression she gave was that of a fairy in disguise—of something, at any rate, too daintily fantastic to be quite human; but a second look generally modified this impression, for either in the quickly moving blue eyes, or in the rather full curve of the livid lips, or else in the carriage of the small but well moulded figure—or perhaps in all three together—there was, on the contrary, a suggestion of an essentially human element, rather more distinctly human, in fact, than what is generally met with in average human beings. On any one else the travel-stained gown and the faded ribbon round the neck would have looked tawdry; on her they only looked picturesque, while the untidy mop of hair, instead of suggesting the want of a comb, was more likely to fill with envy the hearts of women whose hair does not wave naturally. In age she looked barely eighteen, but was in reality twenty-three.

"And you think he's given you the slip for good?" asked the girl in the bed, and as she threw herself round on her pillow it was easy to see, despite

her haggard cheeks, that she too was quite young, younger probably than her companion.

"If I wasn't sure of that do you suppose I'd have chucked the matter so soon? Do lie still, Bella, or you'll be having that compress off again! I half expected it, besides. About halfway through the voyage, I began to see he'd had enough of me, and, sure enough, the very first thing he did on landing was to get lost in the crowd."

"Perhaps it was by mistake," murmured Bella.

"No, it wasn't; I wasn't born yesterday, you know, and it's always best to see things plain. But oh, Bella, it *is* a pity! If you could have seen the sweep of his moustache!"

She remained for a moment, apparently lost in memories, a morsel of ham daintily poised upon her fork.

"Then what are you going to do next?" asked Bella after a minute.

The other sighed quickly and put the ham into her mouth, but she was smiling again before she had done eating it.

"How should I know? I haven't had time to make plans yet. Something generally turns up; at any rate I mean to sleep over it. I suppose it'll be a choice between the old governess business and the stage, and I expect it will end with the stage. Poor mother can't object any longer, and I'm sure they'll take me on. The only question is: what as? I'm too small for most parts—though I know I could manage every one of them; and for the ballet, which would be my proper field, it's rather late. One has to be trained in the nursery, you know."

Bella gazed intently at her friend from under the shelter of the shifting compress.

"How much money have you got remaining?"

"Well, let me see: it's either one shilling over or one shilling under the pound; I can't say for certain without looking."

"Oh, Corry! And yet you buy a supper of ham and eggs, and I do believe you actually enjoy it!"

"Of course I do. If I *am* to starve to-morrow that's no reason, that I can see, for not being thankful for a good supper to-day. Besides, I need my brains for thinking out my position, and brains have to be fed—to starve them would be no economy at all. It all depends on being on the look out; something generally turns up, I tell you."

"Not for me!" sighed Bella, heavily. "Or if something good ever does turn up, something bad is sure to come in between. That's the way it was with that school post I was to get; scarcely had I signed the agreement when I caught this bad cold, and here I am."

"And you call a school post something good? My poor Bella, you couldn't have stood it for a month. There! I told you that compress would be off."

She laid down her knife and fork, and, going over to the bed, with her delicate white hands—her hands were as fine and as well cared for as those of a duchess—picked up the fallen compress, fished the fresh one out of the water, pressed it out, and settled it on Bella's hot forehead, rearranging blanket and pillow as they required it, with a few swift, light touches.

"You are very good to me, Corry," said Bella, rather shakily, catching at one of the small, cool hands

with her hot one. "The idea of you looking me up after all these years! I should have thought that your Bush life would have quite blotted all your old friends from your mind."

"Perhaps I counted on your giving me a shake-down, and wanted to save the night's lodging," remarked Corry, returning to her ham. "Besides, I never said that I had been living in the Bush."

"Where *have* you been living, then? You must have had adventures in five years, and I do wish you'd tell me them."

"Perhaps I have had adventures," said Corry, smiling a little mysteriously at her last bit of egg, "but they must wait till you're well again; I cannot tell you stories while you are so feverish."

She knew quite well that Bella was not going to get well again, but Bella did not know it, and there was no object in enlightening her.

"Well, whatever you've been doing, I'm sure it wasn't anything *very* bad. You're queer, of course, but you're never unkind. I'm sure you'd never do any one a bad turn, nor take away anything they wanted to keep."

"Not unless I wanted it very badly myself," modified Corry.

"And—and you don't tell *lies* now, do you, Corry? I remember that you were rather quick with your fibbing in the short-petticoat time."

"Not unless I have an object," said Corry, serenely.

Bella took another look at her, and sighed.

"I'm sure you're making yourself out worse than you are. To me you've always been nice. I shall

never forget the sash you gave me off your very waist, because I cried for it, that time we were playing the *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the back kitchen. What a state your mother was in! And now to think of your going on the stage, after all! Corry, I do wish you wouldn't! It doesn't seem to me the real straight way of getting along."

"It's a grand way, though, and I've got to do something. What other alternatives have you to offer? I'm quite open to suggestions."

"Well, you seem to have made a good governess —though it *is* hard to imagine you exercising authority— and then there are the schools. Look here, Corry, why shouldn't you apply for the post I was booked for? They'll be in a mess, at any rate, at my having left them in the lurch, and pretty ready to take what ever they can get, so long as the certificates are all right."

Corry laughed good-humouredly.

"Thank you for a very pretty compliment, but I can't say I'm dazzled by the offer. I've tried schoolmistressing over there, you see, and have had about enough of it. Fifty pounds, I suppose—or is it sixty?"

"Fifty."

Corry made a dainty little grimace.

"And a set of lumbering young villagers—ugh! No, thank you, Bella, I think I can do a little better than *that*."

"But coals and lodging are included," persisted Bella, feverishly on fire with her new idea. "And Stonefield is said to be not half a bad place."

Corry had risen from her place at the table, and

was examining the horsehair sofa with a view to passing the night upon it. She turned round quickly now.

"Stonefield?" she asked in a tone of greater attention. "Is that the name of the village you were to have gone to?"

"Yes, of course; didn't I tell you? It's on the property of Sir Louis Hepburne."

"Sir Philip Hepburne, you mean."

"The old man? Oh, he's been dead for years."

"Then it must be Sir Charles Hepburne; Louis was the younger brother."

"Yes, but he's come into it now, through Sir Charles having broken his neck over a stone wall last year, or got drowned, or something."

Corry sat down upon the sofa, and appeared to be reflecting.

"Are you quite sure of this?" she asked at last.

"Yes, positive. I found it all out from Ethel Barnie, when I thought I was going down there. She's been in those parts, you know. But I can't exactly remember," added Bella, conscientiously, "whether it was a stone wall that did for Sir Charles, or something else."

Corry made a movement which seemed to say that the point was irrelevant.

"Is he married?" she next inquired.

"Sir Louis? Not that I know of—no, I'm almost certain he isn't. He only came back from India when he succeeded, and he's barely out of mourning yet. What *are* you after now, Corry? Do you know Sir Louis?"

"That's queer!" was all the answer Corry made, and then relapsed into silence.

"I suppose I should have to apply for the post immediately?" she presently remarked.

"Then you *are* going to try for it, after all?"

"It strikes me that I might do worse. But you've talked enough for to-night; it's time to be getting to sleep. Here's a fresh compress, and mind you call me if you want anything."

And having turned out the gas and wrapped herself in a shawl, Corry lay down contentedly in her clothes upon the horsehair sofa.

Five minutes later Bella, still wide awake, heard her old playfellow chuckling softly to herself, under cover of the shawl.

"What's the matter, Corry?" she asked a little bewildered.

"Nothing; only I told you that something would turn up, and now it has."

CHAPTER IV.

"FOR A BEGINNING."

On an early day in June, Florence Crossley set out on one of those long solitary drives which were among the pleasures of her life. She had at last got Tom Leake resigned to the adoption of his two ill-used nephews, at present resident at Stonefield. Towards Stonefield, therefore, she had turned her pony's head to-day, in order to settle matters with the hard-hearted stepmother.

Her way lay at first through innumerable, almost level lanes, with hedges so high that they barred the outlook. Green fields rolled gently on either side; occasionally, through a gap in the hedge, the flash of a broad river rolling peacefully in the sunlight would be caught; but no eminence was ever gained, therefore there was no view, properly speaking, unless it were the dark line of hills that rose to the west, often lost sight of at a turning, but recovered again at the next, and, in a certain sense, dominating the horizon on this one side. A gracious and fertile country, with juicy looking meadows and luxuriant trees, but free of surprises; a country of soft swells and gradual slopes, of rich orchards and shady pathways, presenting no sharp contrasts, but exceedingly tempting to the eye, and unaccountably cheering to the heart.

Even Florence, who knew every yard by heart, couldn't help lingering by the way. It was the very afternoon for a drive: warm, but not too warm; breezy, but not too breezy; and the world's green dress for the season was still so new, with neither stain nor rent upon it; and in two days at most Louis would be back—he had been gone now for six—and what better surroundings for dwelling on the meeting to come than these blossoming trees and flowering grasses? She looked about her, and sighed deeply and tremulously in the excess of her great happiness.

After a time the road began to rise, and the hedges grew scarcer, and presently Florence emerged with her pony-carriage on to an open road. The line of hills was much nearer now, and the outlook wider. She was heading straight towards them, and the nearer she drew the more did the character of the country change. The luxuriant trees first grew less luxuriant, then scarcer, then became reduced to solitary wind-blown specimens; single boulders began to appear on waste places, the road gave forth a harder ring under the pony's hoofs, stone walls took the place of the waving hedges down on the plain, while heather and furze gradually forced buttercups and daisies into the background. The valley country had melted with curious rapidity into the hill country.

Not long after she had got free of the lanes, Florence's eye had been caught by a black figure far off on the deserted road. She looked at it idly at first, merely because it happened to be the only moving thing within sight at the moment, but by-and-by with awakening curiosity. It was a woman's figure, but unlike the women she was accustomed to meet here:

neither a sturdy farmer's wife nor a ragged tramp. The pedestrian's face was turned this way, and as the distance between them diminished, Florence's curiosity increased. Soon she was near enough to see that this was a singularly fair-headed young girl, in more or less fashionable dress, very small and slight, and tripping with extraordinary lightness over the stony road. She did not think she had ever seen her before, and she knew everybody by sight for miles around. While she was asking herself where she was to fit her in, the stranger had got abreast of the carriage. Her pace had been slackening for a few minutes past, and, owing to the steep ascent, Florence was driving very slowly just then. The two girls looked full at each other, and the next moment would have passed, had not the unknown pedestrian suddenly stood still. Florence pulled up her pony immediately, feeling certain that the other had something to say.

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger, pleasantly, and without a shade of diffidence, "but you are Miss Crossley, are you not?"

"Yes. Do you want to speak to me?"

The few words and the manner in which they were said had shown Florence that the speaker was a lady, but at the same time she could not help observing that the grey kid gloves were sadly worn at the tips, and the red parasol bleached to the semblance of a faded poppy. Now that she saw her close she knew for certain, not only that she had never seen her before, but also that she had never even seen any one in the least like her.

"It is in order to speak to you that I am on my

way to Heywood at this moment. I am Miss Farthingall, the new schoolmistress at Stonefield."

"And you have walked all this way!" was Florence's instinctive exclamation. It was the first thought that struck her as she looked down at the small figure whose slenderness verged on frailty, whose miniature feet seemed quite unsuitable for tramping these rough roads, yet whose tenderly tinted face, strangely enough, was not even flushed by the long, shadeless walk. The new schoolmistress, of course! How stupid of her not to have thought of it before!

"What choice had I, since I do not keep a carriage?" said Miss Farthingall, with a half sunny, half wistful smile.

When she smiled she looked even younger than when she spoke; and at the thought that anything so small and delicate as this creature appeared to be should be put to such a pass as this, Florence felt that particular pang of pity which always visited her at sight of any one less fortunate than herself.

"Well, at least I hope you will make use of mine," she said, far more diffidently than the schoolmistress had spoken. "If you have anything to say to me you can tell it me while I am driving you home. Since we have met, there is no reason for your going on to Heywood."

But, instead of jumping at the offer, Miss Farthingall appeared to be hesitating. She looked back towards Stonefield, doubtfully, then again in the direction of Heywood.

"It is very kind of you, but there is some one else in Heywood whom I have promised to speak to, and I

am not so *very* tired. I suppose it will not take me long to get there now?"

"Indeed it will! You are scarcely half way yet. If it was not that I have business with Mrs. Leake at Stonefield, I should be so glad to turn back with you."

"Mrs. Leake!" exclaimed the other, almost joyfully. "Why, it seems to me that our business is identical. It is exactly from Mrs. Leake that I am bringing you a message to-day. I happened to be in her house yesterday, and she told me all about your project for the boys, and, as I had a free afternoon to-day, and was glad of the chance of seeing the country, I offered to take her message, as well as to settle details with the uncle."

"Oh," said Florence, her face clearing, "then that's all right! I needn't go to Stonefield at all to-day, and I'll show you Heywood instead, since you want to see the country; and then, if the arrangement suits you, I'll make William drive you back before dark."

Judging from the grateful smile and from the alacrity with which she now took a place in the pony-carriage, the arrangement suited Miss Farthingall very well indeed.

"How did you recognize me?" Florence asked, as she turned the pony.

Miss Farthingall laughed. "Oh, you were described to me," she said lightly.

The interview with Tom Leake having been satisfactorily got over, Florence drove straight back to the house, for it was past teatime, and her experience with schoolmistresses made her feel certain that

this one had not had over-much to eat to-day. She was very pleased with her new acquaintance, whose quiet assurance of bearing was an agreeable contrast to the regulation manners of her class, and whose fair face aroused in her a feeling of enthusiastic admiration; but she could not look at her, nor at her gloves, without wishing that she could do something more for her than merely give her a lift in the pony-carriage.

As they turned in at the gates, and rolled under the branches of the mighty beeches, which, between them, seemed bent on smothering the rambling grey old hall in their leafy embraces, Miss Farthingall looked about her with eyes of lively interest.

"You have a lovely home," she said thoughtfully. "You must be very happy here."

But it was on reaching Florence's private apartment—a dream of comfort and unostentatious luxury, with soft-tinted hangings and well-lined bookshelves, and the easiest of easy chairs, opening their arms invitingly to whomsoever entered, with costly trifles standing about at haphazard, and fresh-cut flowers standing in every corner—that the interest of the schoolmistress evidently reached its height. She had grown rather silent since entering the park gates; now she said nothing at all, but stood looking about her with quickly moving blue eyes which took in everything.

"I'm just going to take off my hat," said Florence; "and please make yourself comfortable meanwhile."

The moment that she was alone Miss Farthingall's face changed. Her attitude became more alert, while into the eyes that had only been observant, there came a more intense, a hungrier look. Over every part of

the room they passed longingly, hanging fast here and there, as though they could not free themselves. She took up an ivory paper-cutter from the table beside her, and looked long at the turquoises with which the handle was encrusted; then, going up to one of the curtains, she felt the texture between her fingers, and enviously sighed. Then, shaking her head, as though to get rid of some oppression, she walked with a certain business-like air up to the nearest bookcase, and read the names on the books: there were at least two poets to one prose writer. A smile came to the schoolmistress's face as she read. Still smiling, she moved to the piano alongside, and rapidly turned over a few of the songs on its top. The smile deepened, and a little satisfied nod seemed to say, "Yes, that fits!" On a basket table there lay a piece of work; she went nearer to look at it, and when she saw that it was a small jacket of strong flannel, of a sort much affected by rustic babies, she nerely laughed aloud.

All at once she caught sight of a photograph on the mantlepiece, and almost sprang towards it. It was the last portrait of Sir Louis Hepburne, taken at about the time of his engagement, and showing his fine head and shoulders to admirable advantage. The schoolmistress uttered a rapid exclamation, and, carrying it to the light, began to examine it attentively. She was still standing there immovable, with her head bent, when Florence returned.

"Oh, Miss Farthingall, with your hat still on!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

Miss Farthingall turned and looked at her hostess with an expression in her eyes which had not been

there before, and which for just one moment made Florence wonder vaguely. At the same time she perceived the photograph in her hand.

"Oh," she said, and blushed a little, "I suppose I ought to explain how that comes to be here?"

"It is Sir Louis Hepburne, is it not?" asked Miss Farthingall, quickly.

"Yes; and we are engaged to be married."

It was not until much later that it occurred to her to wonder how the new schoolmistress had found out the original of the portrait so quickly.

"So they told me at Stonefield," remarked Miss Farthingall, quite composedly now, as she returned the photo to its place; "but I felt rather too much of a stranger to offer my congratulations."

"We shall not be strangers for long, I hope," said Florence, warmly. "I feel sure that you will help me with my work; in fact, you have begun by helping me. Nothing could have been more providential than our meeting on the road."

"If I am no help it will not be for want of goodwill. But, tell me, Miss Crossley, what *is* your work exactly?"

The visitor's hat was removed by this time, and both girls were ensconced in low chairs. Florence could not help being struck by the ease with which Miss Farthingall had let herself down into hers—it was not what she was accustomed to in schoolmistresses. The way this little person lounged there, as though to the manner born, only helped to heighten Florence's interest in her, and awaken the conviction that she must have seen better days.

"My work? Well, it's rather difficult to explain;

it just consists in whatever comes my way. This question now of Tom Leake adopting his nephews—I don't think any one else would have taken it in hand if I had not."

Miss Farthingall did not answer immediately. From under her long yellow lashes she was intently watching her hostess, whose dark head was thrown back against the red cushion of the chair. "She is handsomer without her hat than with it," her reflections ran meanwhile. "Her face is not perfect, but it's just the sort to make a man mad."

"And why did *you* take it in hand?" she asked, after a moment.

"In order to lighten the poor boys' wretched lot. That step-mother ill-uses them horribly, and I simply can't look on at that sort of thing."

"I see; you have too soft a heart."

"Not that, but I have a certain sense of justice, which makes me long to put things right when I see them wrong."

"I see," said Miss Farthingall again; and then broke off so abruptly that Florence glanced inquiringly at her.

A footman had just entered with a tray, and, following the direction of the schoolmistress's eyes, Florence saw that they were fixed upon the covered silver dish from which issued a hot and most appetizing scent. In the delight of sniffing the suggestive air, she seemed suddenly to have forgotten what she was saying, while the blue eyes dilated as they looked, and the tip of her rosy tongue appeared, quick as a flash, first at one and then at the other corner of the expectant mouth.

"Hungry!" said Florence to herself, and her heart contracted with a new pang of pity. "Positively hungry! Oh, why did I not bring her back here at once? Oh, how thoughtless I am!"

She made such haste now to pour out the tea that she almost scalded her fingers, and in her fear lest the schoolmistress should be too modest to help herself decently, she emptied about half the tea-cakes on to her plate. It looked a tremendous portion for an apparently so ethereal person, but, to Florence's relief, as well as slightly to her surprise, the pile disappeared with a rapidity which, despite her far more substantial frame, she never could have emulated.

For a time little was said. To a more prosaic mind there might, at this juncture, besides the word "hungry," also have occurred another adjective, but Florence, as she watched her guest, well-pleased, could think only of the pitiable lot of those who are forced to eat their fill under strange roofs. Miss Farthingall, as she sipped her tea and put one morsel of tea-cake after another into her rosy mouth, was somewhat of a study at this moment. It was the very best tea-cake she had ever eaten, and she was enjoying it with all the gusto of a highly sensitive palate. The tea also was perfect, and the exquisite china it was served in helped to make it more perfect in her eyes. It was with an almost affectionate tenderness that she handled the delicate cup, as well as the quaint silver spoon. The lids were half sunk over her eyes, as though she were lost in some blissful dream. But she had not really forgotten what she meant to say; she had only postponed it. Her plate was well-nigh

empty when, with a luxurious sigh, she looked straight across at her hostess.

"So it is your sense of justice that makes you bother about other people?" she observed, taking up the discussion exactly where it had been dropped.

"I suppose it is; or perhaps it is only my own peace of mind I am after. It makes me feel uncomfortable to see miserable people."

"Ah?" remarked Miss Farthingall, with a distinct point of interrogation, and a look which evidently waited for more.

"Yes; you see it was this way." And, somewhat awkwardly at first, yet with awakening warmth, Florence proceeded to bring out some of her pet theories of life, Miss Farthingall throwing in a question here and there, and never taking her eyes off the other's face.

"If all people were like you, there would be hope for the unfortunate," said the schoolmistress, thoughtfully at last.

Florence saw the blue eyes shining with what looked like genuine excitement, and wondered what she had been saying. It was not her way to be expansive, but the evident interest with which she had been listened to, and the expectant glances, had led her on further than she was accustomed to go with her intimates, let alone strangers. She put up her hands to her cheeks now and felt that they were burning.

"There would be hope for the unfortunate," repeated Miss Farthingall; and then added a little lower, "Perhaps there would even be hope for me."

"Then you *are* one of the unfortunate!" cried Florence, carried out of herself for the moment. "I

felt certain of it as soon as I saw you. Oh, if only I could help you!"

"That would be expecting a little too much," said Miss Farthingall, with a queer smile, which was almost a grimace. "After all, what can it matter to you whether I am unfortunate or not? Has not every second woman you meet suffered some sort of wrong?"

The words were said with so curious an emphasis that Florence stared, but at the same moment the schoolmistress got up hastily, and began speaking in quite a different tone, as though provoked with herself for having gone so far. It was time for her to be going, she smilingly assured her hostess; she ought to be looking after to-morrow's lessons, instead of chattering over the tea-cups.

"But you will come to tea with me again next week?" pleaded Florence at parting.

Miss Farthingall was about to utter an eager "Yes," when something seemed to occur to her.

"Not until you have returned my visit," she laughed, with that charming audacity which had taken Florence's fancy by storm from the moment of their meeting. "It is easier for you to move than for me. What good-looking servants you have here!" she suddenly interrupted herself. "The footman who brought in the tea was a typical Anglo-Saxon, and this groom here has got almost classical features. Is that the one who is to drive me home? I have such a strongly developed æsthetic sense that I can't help noticing these things," she added quickly, meeting Florence's slightly bewildered gaze. "But you haven't promised me the visit yet. Will you come?"

"I will," said Florence, readily; and she turned back to her sitting-room as the pony-carriage left the door.

The evening post had been brought in meanwhile, and among the letters was one from Louis. She opened it with bright eyes, which clouded as she read. Sir Louis was writing to say that, owing to an indisposition of his mother's, his return would have to be postponed for at least a week, possibly for longer.

Florence laid the letter down with an impatient exclamation. It was but a small disappointment, comparatively speaking, but she had never been accustomed to disappointments, and did not know how to bear them.

Meanwhile, the schoolmistress, as she passed out through the gates of Heywood Hall, was saying to herself, "I think that will do for a beginning."

CHAPTER V.

STONEFIELD.

The difference between Heywood and Stonefield was the difference between a sleek and smiling milk-maid and an unkempt mountain brigand. There all blinking cottages and overflowing gardens, here rugged stony houses enclosed in rugged stony walls, and backed by the hill-fastnesses, where rocky gorges had, in the old outlaw days, often proved a mere trap to the arm of justice. Ever since her childhood, Florence had looked with a shiver of awe at the grey pile whose clumsy, round tower, reared sharply against the naked line of hill behind, seemed to dominate the grey village at its feet, but only one of whose chimneys ever smoked: that of the caretaker who looked after the place, which the family visited only at long intervals, preferring their less pretentious, but more modern residence in ——shire. Stonefield was the cradle of the race, no doubt, but cradles dating from the thirteenth century are not apt to be comfortable; it was a place to be proud of, but not to live in—so, at least, all the latter Heywoods had decided. But Sir Louis was of another opinion. To modify the discomforts of the old pile by means of modern appliances, and then to pitch his tent, where his forefathers had

seen the light of day, was his pet plan, at which ever since he succeeded he had been working, with the result that he now felt himself justified in fetching home his mother. And now Florence could look up at what her father called the "old robbers' nest" without any shiver of awe, but with the happy glow brought to her heart by the knowledge that she was looking at her future home.

Only five days had passed since Miss Farthingall had drunk tea with her, for, although no especial business brought her to Stonefield to-day—the adoption of Tom Leake's nephews being already an accomplished fact—she had not been able to wait a whole week before returning the visit. The more she reflected upon the remarks dropped by the schoolmistress on that occasion—and her imagination had been at work on them ever since—the more convinced did she feel that Miss Farthingall must have gone through, or be going through some heavy trial, which, although evidently bravely borne, must yet be very hard to bear. To perceive that something was wrong, and to feel vaguely pushed towards putting it right somehow, were, with Florence, two simultaneous things. Most wrong things can be put right—such was her creed—if only people will take the trouble. But in order to be of any use here she would need to know more, and therefore it was that she had not been able to keep away from Stonefield for a whole week. The more quickly she got intimate with Miss Farthingall, the more chance would there be of discovering the cause of her trouble.

The schoolhouse had just given forth its stream of dishevelled urchins and short petticoated lassies,

but the long, bare, oppressively close room still reeked of their presence, although the only figure visible was that of the schoolmistress, with her elbow on the desk, her chin in her hand, and eyes somewhat moodily fixed on the wall opposite, while the heap of copy-books before her lay untouched and apparently forgotten. At sight of her visitor she started up with a joyful exclamation, not, however, without having first cast a hurried glance downwards at her attire. In such contingencies the instinctive question generally is, "Am I well enough dressed?" but in this case, curiously enough, what passed through Miss Farthingall's mind was, "I wish I had put on my old merino; this cotton looks almost fresh."

The exclamation, as well as the obviously genuine pleasure, went straight to Florence's heart. Evidently the sympathy was mutual.

"This is *too* sweet of you!" the schoolmistress was saying, pressing her visitor's hand with a strength for which Florence never would have credited those fairy-like fingers. "I could not have felt quite easy until I had returned your kind hospitality. And now let me do the honours of the premises; I have a bigger reception-room than you, you see," she added with one of her wistful smiles.

Florence looked around her. She had been in the Stonefield schoolroom before, but it had generally been on such festive occasions as prize-givings or Christmas treats, when flower-garlands or holly-wreaths had done much towards masking the bareness of these white-washed walls. Certainly the dreariness of the apartment had never obtruded itself upon her as it did now, when she knew that she was

looking at the background of Miss Farthingall's daily life.

"Why do you make such a dismal face?" asked Miss Farthingall, laughing. "Don't you think it's a nice room? Perhaps you would like some more pictures on the walls? But that would distract my pupils, and me too, I'm afraid! I dare say it will be rather draughty in winter, for these windows don't close just perfectly, but one can guard against that with a shawl; besides, I'm used to these small inconveniences, you know."

At this moment Florence heard a sound in the corner behind her, and looked round to perceive a ten-year-old boy sullenly cowering on a stool, with his nose buried in a book.

"Oh, Fred Hall!" remarked Miss Farthingall, coolly; "I had forgotten his existence. He was to have stopped an hour longer, but I shall let him off in your honour. Fred Hall, come here!"

The boy rose heavily, and slouched towards the desk, before which Miss Farthingall had again taken her place, as though more distinctly to assume her official character.

"What was that you said between class hours, Fred Hall?" inquired the schoolmistress, fixing her eyes upon the boy's face. Her whole manner had undergone a complete change in one moment,—her features set, and every trace of a smile gone from her face.

"I said as 'ow I could put 'ee in my pocket easy when I 'as five years older nor now," drawled out the boy, reluctantly.

"And will you ever say that again?"

No answer. The culprit studied his boots intently for a while, then, as though compelled against his will, squinted up into the schoolmistress's face. Yes,—it was just as he had guessed: the light blue eyes were still upon him.

"Will you ever say that again?"

"Na-aw," said the boy in a burst, aware only of the necessity of getting away from those eyes.

"Then you can go."

And he went with amazing alacrity.

"I was going to have asked you how on earth you manage to get yourself obeyed by these unruly hillside children—I know how obstreperous they are," said Florence almost awe-struck—"but now I think I know."

"I always manage to get obeyed," answered Miss Farthingall, beginning to smile again. "I have had to punish several of them for making fun of my appearance. Because they belong to a race of giants themselves, they can't realize that small people are any good in the world; but I don't think I shall have to punish any more on that account," she added with a quiet gleam in her eye.

Florence looked at her admiringly. The short scene had revealed Miss Farthingall to her in a new light, and one which she had not suspected.

"And now," said the schoolmistress, rising again, "come into my private den—I lodge in the house, you know—and let me give you a cup of tea."

Preceding Florence, she crossed the passage, and opened a door on the other side. A small, one-windowed room was revealed. Miss Farthingall walked quickly to the middle of it, and then stood still so

suddenly that Florence, following, came near to knocking against her.

"Good gracious!" the schoolmistress exclaimed, bringing her two hands together with an almost dramatic gesture. "How horribly careless of me! I actually forgot that the room has not been done out to-day! Old Mrs. Bend, who does it for me, is laid up with a stitch in her side, and I really haven't had a moment's breathing-time to look after it myself. Please forgive me! I ought never to have brought you in here."

Miss Farthingall's consternation at what she had done was so great that she seemed almost to have lost her head for a moment, for, instead of immediately leading the way out again, she stood for a full half-minute longer, apparently rooted to the spot, and looking confusedly about her. During that half-minute Florence had time to impress on her memory various details, which, as she instantly foresaw, would haunt her for many days to come: the thin blanket on the unmade bed, the chipped washing-basin with the dirty water standing in it, the poor mean little dressing-gown that hung over the back of a chair, even the dregs of the cold breakfast tea in the cup, and the empty egg-shell beside it. The want of order accentuated each pitiable detail tenfold, and, thinking of the hundred daintinesses of her own luxurious apartment, Florence felt an irresistible sense of depression descending upon her.

"I beg your pardon! Oh, I beg your pardon!" she murmured, with burning cheeks, acutely aware of the discomfort which she felt certain the other must

be suffering, and feeling as though she had indiscreetly forced herself upon this woman's privacy.

But Miss Farthingall had apparently recovered her wits by this time.

"Haven't I told you that it's my fault?" she said, with quite a gay little laugh. "I'm terribly scatter-brained for a schoolmistress—sometimes. But never mind! We'll have tea in the school-room; I've the run of it out of school hours, you know."

In a few minutes more Florence found herself seated on a very hard wooden chair, and in front of a deal table plentifully spotted with ink. She was alone for the moment, for the schoolmistress had gone to "forage for the tea-things," as she expressed herself, and her heart was heavy. She could not get rid of the picture of that desolate bedroom of which she had caught a glimpse. Used as she was to luxury of every sort, it seemed to her that under such circumstances life could not be worth living.

Miss Farthingall, meanwhile, was looking for a table-cloth. There were two in the small wall-press behind the door in the bedroom. She took them both out and unfolded them, one after the other. The first was of wretched quality, but it was entire; the schoolmistress frowned as she examined it. The second was of equally wretched quality, and had, moreover, an undarned hole somewhere about the middle. At sight of that hole her face brightened—it was that that she had been looking for. She ran back to the schoolroom and began busily laying the cloth.

"I think I told you that I don't keep a footman," she chattered gaily as she moved. "I'm afraid you'll have to amuse yourself by drawing figures on the

black board while I'm getting the crockery; or there's the map, you know—you might be improving your geographical ideas of Great Britain, meanwhile. Are you sure you're quite comfortable on that chair? One has got to get used to doing without cushions."

She was gone in another moment, and presently back again with an exceedingly battered tray, on which stood two cups of different patterns, and two plates unrelated to either of the cups.

"I hope you don't mind their not matching," she said, with an irresistible smile. "The second cup with rose-buds is the one in my room, but it would take me too long to wash it. Now for the repast itself! I wonder, by-the-by, if there's any butter in the house?"

After a somewhat longer absence she returned, bearing in triumph an earthenware teapot, minus half the handle, a small can of skim milk, some lumps of sugar on a saucer, and a large plate on which reposed six slices of bread, thickly cut and thinly buttered.

"What do you say to that?" she asked, as she deposited her load upon the table. "I *thought* I had seen some butter in the kitchen."

Florence said nothing at all, but tried to smile. She had taken the opportunity of Miss Farthingall's absence to fling down one of her gloves carelessly on the too conspicuous hole in the table-cloth, in order to spare her hostess's feelings; but Miss Farthingall, oddly enough, seemed blind to the defect, for, having removed the disguising glove, she omitted to replace it by either the tea-pot or the milk-jug.

"How do you like my tea?" she asked, presently,

having filled Florence's cup. "I am afraid it isn't *quite* as good as yours."

"It's very good—very good indeed," stammered Florence, blushing guiltily, for she had not yet learnt to fib with ease.

"I'm *so* glad; I was afraid you might be more particular. But please have some bread and butter —I cut it myself, you know."

The first bite made Florence wish that after all there had been no butter in the house; dry bread may be dreary, but not quite so dreary as rancid butter.

"It was a good idea to knock off that handle," reflected the schoolmistress, as she watched her guest's gallant efforts to swallow at least one slice of the dreadful bread, and her endeavours not to look towards the decrepit teapot or the unmasked hole.

Suddenly the schoolmistress made a quick little exclamation, and Florence, looking up, saw her gazing at her full cup with an expression of comical dismay.

"Dear me, I *am* stupid to-day! I had quite forgotten that I've got nothing to stir it with."

"You've forgotten to bring a teaspoon?" suggested Florence.

"That's to say I've forgotten that I haven't got one to bring. I had two silver teaspoons which used to belong to my mother, but the other one I——" I——"

Florence stared with a horrified question in her eyes.

"I sold it last week," finished Miss Farthingall, as with a supreme effort. "But never mind," she added, before the other could speak; "anything will do to stir my tea with. There's a quite new pen-

holder in my desk; it's not got even a spot of ink on it yet—that will do beautifully. There! Spoons are only a prejudice, after all!"

"Don't; oh, please don't!" cried out Florence, unable to contain herself any longer. "Don't speak like that!"

Miss Farthingall looked at her in innocent wonder.

"Not speak like what? Does it distress you to be reminded that I am—well, just a schoolmistress? Of course there is no reason for your feelings being harassed; I had no idea they were so susceptible. I beg your pardon a thousand times. Let us talk of something else. How hot it is to-day! An almost Australian temperature."

"Have you been in Australia?" asked Florence, astonished.

"I have only just returned from there, after five years of home-sickness."

"But, then, why——?" began Florence, and then stopped short.

"You mean—Why, then, did I ever go? Ah, well, that would be a long story, and a dull one, probably, to your ears."

"Certainly not dull," said Florence, impulsively. "I have been trying to find courage to ask you to speak about yourself—only I don't quite dare."

Miss Farthingall's eyes opened wider.

"About myself? Is it possible that anything about such an insignificant person could interest you? Besides, how do you know that I have anything to say?"

"I feel sure of it. Something that you said last time has made me think. The moment that I saw you

I felt certain that you must have—I mean that you ought by rights to be in a better position. You are not like other schoolmistresses."

Miss Farthingall had suddenly become grave.

"Perhaps I ought to be in another position," she remarked, gazing into her cup. "Perhaps I would have been, if all had gone straight; but what is the good of talking of that now?"

"Please don't think that I want to force myself on your confidence!" exclaimed Florence, blushing painfully. "If I appear inquisitive, it is only because I cannot conceal the interest with which you inspired me from the first; but if you would rather not talk about it, then of course let us drop the subject."

"That is easier said than done," remarked Miss Farthingall, a trifle hastily. "Once touched upon, a subject of this sort cannot well be dropped without leaving behind it a feeling of constraint. I wonder now what you will be imagining about me if I do not tell you the real facts?" and she looked into Florence's face with a wonderfully faint smile.

"Nothing bad, at any rate," protested Florence. "I only thought that perhaps—perhaps you had been better off, once upon a time; that you are what people call 'come down in the world.'"

The schoolmistress shook her head, still with that faint smile.

"Guess again! It is true that my father belonged to one of the oldest families in Ireland, but he never had any fortune to speak of, so as far as money is concerned, I have never really been higher up in the world than I am now. If my tastes don't appear quite to tally with my surroundings, I suppose it is

because they are inherited; but my trouble is of another sort."

"Oh, if only it was something that could be remedied!" said Florence, a trifle excitedly. "I have known you such a short time, yet I would give so much to be able to help you!"

"Would you really?" asked Miss Farthingall, narrowing the eyes which rested on Florence's face into a peculiarly intense gaze, while her red lips twitched just perceptibly with some emotion impossible to define.

"Yes, really—if only it were in my power; but I can scarcely hope for that. Since your trouble is not of a pecuniary nature, I cannot imagine——"

She stopped short, hesitating between the fear of appearing indiscreet and the desire to be of use, at least as a comforter, even if in no other capacity.

"You cannot imagine what can be wrong," completed Miss Farthingall for her. "How should you? You are too young yourself, and—too prosperous, ever to have been what people call 'crossed in love,'—there! it is out now, though I had not meant to speak. You see it is but the old, old story, after all, and far too commonplace an edition of it to interest you."

"Anything you like to tell me about yourself would interest me," faltered Florence, in whose youthfully romantic heart a very natural curiosity had for the moment supplanted every other feeling.

Miss Farthingall appeared to be debating with herself.

"If that is really so," she remarked, after a minute, with what appeared to her a lingering remnant of hesitation, "I suppose there is no reason why I

should not tell you my story. It will not take long, at any rate; but I give you fair warning that you will find it dull."

She paused again for a few seconds, and appeared to be studying the map of Great Britain on the opposite wall, while Florence waited with bated breath.

"I have told you that my parents were not well off," she began after that pause, and with her eyes still turned away from her hearer. "It was necessary that I should do something; therefore, as soon as I was old enough, I looked out for a situation as governess. I found one in a wealthy Scotch family, and for nearly a year I gave full satisfaction. The year was not quite over when there came a visitor to the house."

Miss Farthingall paused for another second before going on, and a thrill of expectation ran through Florence.

"He was a cousin of my employers, a man of position and several years older than myself. From the first he was a great favourite with his little cousins, my pupils, and thus we came to be frequently thrown together. Soon I began to perceive that these meetings were growing more frequent than necessary, and at the same time something in his manner began to make me feel uneasy. In spite of my inexperience, I feared for my good name in the houses. I resolved to avoid him as much as lay in my power, but his evident determination to cross my path at every turn was too strong for me; and besides—I will not deny it—I had myself to fight against as well, for very early in our acquaintance my heart belonged to him. I was stupidly innocent at that time, and, seeing his

persistence, I took for granted that he intended to marry me. This helped to undermine my prudence, and from day to day I grew weaker. I know I was to blame, but it was only because I trusted to him entirely; and the end was——"

"Yes?" asked Florence breathlessly.

"The end was that he went away without having asked me to be his wife, and leaving me so compromised by his attentions that my employer gave me warning on the very day after his departure. I could no longer be considered a fit instructress for his daughters, I was told. My family, to whom a crooked and aggravated edition of the story was reported, declined to receive me; and altogether it was lucky for me that some Australian acquaintances of my employer's happened to be on the look-out for a governess, and, being in a hurry to start home, had no time to examine too closely into my character. The least troublesome proceeding was to palm me off on them, for the object was to get me out of the country as soon as possible. I verily believe they feared I was going to run after my truant admirer, and thus get them into a scrape with his parents for not having looked after him better."

"And he never gave a sign of life?" asked Florence, trembling with indignation.

"Never. I dare say he never even thought of me again. I had done well enough for a few weeks' amusement—that was all."

"Wretch!" cried Florence, springing to her feet with impetuously clenched hands.

"No, no, you must not say that!" said Miss Farthingall, quickly.

"Then you still care for him?"

The schoolmistress nodded, with her eyes still on the map of Great Britain.

"It is possible, you know, that he never was aware of the ruin which his acquaintance brought to my good name, as well as my position."

"Then he should be enlightened. If he has a grain of honour in his composition, he will marry you yet. He is not married yet, I hope?"

"No; but he is engaged to be married."

"That is bad, but still not quite hopeless. Oh, Miss Farthingall, I am sure—I am quite sure that if he knew the truth he would still do you justice. I don't believe in there being such wicked men in the world. There *must* be some way of acquainting him with the facts. I suppose you could not make up your mind to write to him, or to *her?* It is possible that she would be generous enough to recognize your claims; and, besides, she ought to be enlightened as to the character of her future husband. If only it was somebody that I knew, then possibly I could do something. You haven't told me his name by-the-by?"

"I never meant to say his name, and I never shall."

"Never at all?"

"Never at all."

Florence sat down again in an access of dejection.

"That makes it much more difficult. How am I to help you if you give me no clue?"

"My dear Miss Crossley," said the schoolmistress, at last turning her full gaze upon her, "it is not because I hoped for help that I have confided in you. For that my wrong is of too long a standing already—

you must remember that all this happened five years ago. Your kind sympathy is all the help I have a right to expect. The worst of my suffering is over already—I will not harrow you by an account of the ill-luck which pursued me across the sea. It was there that I was forced to leave the schoolmistress business in order not to starve. Now that home-sickness has driven me back to England, I can at least hope that the story against me is forgotten, and will no longer stand in my way—unless, indeed, some unlucky chance, some untoward meeting, should unbury it again." She sighed uneasily, and looked out of the window. "For the rest, I have long been resigned to my lot. There are a certain number of necessary victims in the world, and I happen to be one of them—that is all," and she smiled sadly, gazing deep into Florence's excited eyes.

"That cannot be all, that cannot be all!" was all that Florence could say. "Something ought certainly to be done, if I only knew what!"

The thought and even the very words pursued her the whole way home. "That cannot be all," she said to herself as the pony-carriage crossed the sturdy little stone bridge, under whose pair of low-hanging arches the stream rushed foaming, to tumble noisily down the village street. It was the same stream which down there on the plain spread its waters so placidly and flowed in so sober a manner between the green fields; but up here, barely freed from its rocky nursery, it was a different creature altogether.

"That cannot be all!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE GREEN RIBBON.

But it almost seemed as though it were going to be all; for although the days that followed upon the visit to the schoolhouse brought several other—more or less—chance meetings between Florence and her new friend, and although the subject once touched upon between them never sank entirely out of sight, there still appeared no prospect of any real object being reached. The consciousness of her own helplessness weighed depressingly upon Florence—all the more depressingly for the occasional chance remarks which kept her awake to the wretchedness of the situation, as well as for the hundreds of small details which were for ever obtruding themselves on her notice, and telling her again and again how cruel fate had been to this dainty being—in affairs of the purse as well as in affairs of the heart. "Something must certainly be done," had been her idea from the first—the idea which invariably occurred to her whenever anything went wrong in the family affairs of the village. Force of habit had, doubtless, a great deal to do with making "Miss Providence" feel vaguely responsible for the issue of this affair; but personal interest in the victim, as well as a certain need of mental occupation—for

Sir Louis had been forced still further to postpone his return—had even more to do with it.

Nothing, however, could be done without knowing the name of the faithless man. This much was clear, even to Florence's sanguine spirit; and on this one point the schoolmistress appeared impenetrable. She scarcely shrank now from speaking of her past. Florence had learnt that she was the only daughter of a highly distinguished but impoverished officer, who died in her early childhood; that her mother had followed him only a few years ago, having died—so Florence gathered—broken-hearted and estranged from her only child, then absent in Australia, and all in consequence of that fatal affair five years ago. There were vague hints dropped, too, concerning other relations—distant, but wealthy—from whom she might have had expectations, which also had been lost from the same cause. She spoke to Florence quite openly of the mental sufferings she had undergone, and, with an almost childish *naïveté*, confided to her her undying fidelity to the man who had robbed her of everything worth having; but no persuasion could induce her to pronounce his name, just as no wile of which Florence was capable could catch her tripping on this point. Such constancy filled Florence with a mixture of rage and admiration. It was insupportable to be thus baffled, but it was also wonderful to see this fidelity.

"It is because you want to spare him that you will not name him," she burst out on one of these occasions. "But, tell me—is it really possible that you should still care for the wretch after all this?"

"I cannot help myself," was the schoolmistress's

answer, accompanied by a rapid little sigh. "Wretch, or no wretch, he is the only man I could ever really love."

"Absurd!" said Florence aloud, while in her heart of hearts she knew quite well that she would have felt exactly the same thing supposing Louis had treated her as the unknown man had treated Miss Farthingall. "But you *do* admit that he is a wretch?" she remarked, after a moment.

The schoolmistress shrugged her shoulders. "If you knew the world as well as I do," she said, with a lenient smile, "you would know what a real wretch is like. Measured by the common standard, he—the man I am speaking of—has really not done anything very bad. He has only made the most of his opportunities for pleasure, and then gone on his way smiling, and without looking back over his shoulder. It is a game which can be played with impunity, so long as the woman in question is only a poor governess, with no protector at hand."

Florence threw back her head impatiently against the chair-back, and clenched her teeth. These were the sort of remarks that, by betraying to her the greatness of the evil, caused the sense of her helplessness to become almost unbearable. Something would certainly have to be done—but what?

"I think I have the clue to your secret," she said one day with an irritated laugh.

As the schoolmistress bent forward to help herself to sugar, she had caught sight of a narrow pale-green ribbon, which peeped over the somewhat open neck of her summer dress, and disappeared again under the bodice.

Miss Farthingall looked up with a genuinely startled glance, and asked quickly, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that ribbon," said Florence, a trifle grimly, pointing towards the suspected object. "I'm ready to bet six pairs of gloves on the spot that it's got something to do with *him*. Either there's a packet of his letters at the end of it, or a curl of his hair in a locket, or his portrait, or a dried flower, or Heaven knows what; but anyway, I'm sure that if only I could get hold of that green ribbon, I would know a great deal more than I know now."

"Nonsense!" Miss Farthingall was beginning, but then stopped short. "I mean that, of course, I'm not going to tell you. I didn't suppose you could see the ribbon, and as for what is on it—well, you must just imagine what you like."

She was busily hiding away every trace of it as she spoke, while Florence watched her with honestly inquisitive eyes.

That evening, while undressing for the night, Miss Farthingall suddenly paused in the untying of a string, and smiled radiantly at the wall opposite.

"I have it!" she exclaimed aloud in her delight. "That will certainly be the best way!"

On the table beside her lay that same narrow green ribbon which had to-day attracted Florence's attention; suspended to it was a tiny leather bag, made out of an old glove, and containing the one banknote which Miss Farthingall at this moment possessed. To carry the bulk of her small store of money thus about on her person was an old habit of hers, born of years

of wandering, and of the caution learnt in unsafe corners of the earth.

With eager eyes and bright cheeks, she now ran to the battered trunk which stood in the corner of the room, and, having unlocked it, sat down in her petticoats on the floor to examine its contents. There was not much inside except heelless stockings and coverless books, but everything was so mixed up that several minutes passed before, with a satisfied exclamation, she drew out an old cigarbox, tied up firmly crosswise with twine. The knots proving unmanageable, and no scissors being at hand, the schoolmistress had recourse to her teeth, which luckily proved as sharp as they were white and even. The open lid revealed a small medley of nondescript objects, in which packets of letters and crackly things in crumpled envelopes—which may possibly have been dried flowers—composed the chief elements. The first thing which came into Miss Farthingall's hand as she felt about in the box was something carefully wrapped up in tissue paper, something round and hard—as, for instance, a ring might be round and hard—but this she thrust back again quickly, with what looked almost like a shudder. A few more seconds' search brought to light a flat silver locket, with a carbuncle star upon it. Still squatting on the floor, Miss Farthingall pressed the spring, and then sat for several minutes immovable, gazing fixedly at what she saw within. Various changes passed over her face as she looked, and it was with a long-drawn, feverishly heavy sigh, that at last she rose to her feet.

The rest of her task was easy—only to remove the leather money-bag from the green ribbon, to lock it

away in the trunk, and then to slip the silver locket on to its place.

"Yes; that will certainly be the best way," she repeated to herself, as, with a deep breath of satisfaction, she at length laid her head on the pillow.

The next time she met the schoolmistress, and again the next, Florence, being on the look-out, succeeded in catching passing glimpses of the green ribbon, and with each glimpse the conviction grew that here lay the clue to the secret. But, in face of the anxiety with which Miss Farthingall tucked away the tell-tale strip whenever its edge slipped beyond her neck-band, she could not find the courage to refer to the matter again.

Another week had almost gone past, when, one afternoon, Florence appeared with a radiant face at the schoolhouse, rather to Miss Farthingall's surprise, for it had not ceased raining since morning.

"I am come to say good-bye in a sort of sense," she explained. "That is to say, I am afraid—no, I mean I hope—I shall be a good deal occupied next week, and so I thought I would spend an hour or two with you to-day, because, you see, Louis is coming back the day after to-morrow," she finished, laughing and blushing in sheer delight.

Miss Farthingall had been placing a chair for her guest. She turned round quickly now.

"The day after to-morrow?" she asked in an almost startled tone. "Already?"

"Do you call it already? I call it at last. Why, he's been away for nearly three weeks."

"To be sure, I forgot," said Miss Farthingall, recovering herself. "To you, of course, it must appear

an age. Well, I must make the most of you while I have you. Let me see—where shall we have tea?" She appeared to reflect for a moment. "I think it had better be in my little room to-day. It is rather chilly in here on wet days. Only wait one minute, please, while I put on something warmer; I have been shivering all the morning in this cotton thing."

She was gone for about five minutes, and then returned to fetch her guest.

"You will excuse me, of course, while I see about the tea," she said sweetly, at the door of her bedroom. "Please make yourself comfortable meanwhile—if you can."

Florence, entering alone, looked shyly about her. She had not been in here since the day of her first visit, when she had carried away with her so dreary a picture of the disordered apartment. To-day the place was so far in order that the bed was made, and that there were no empty breakfast things on the table; but even as it was, the room, with its thin scrap of a carpet, its washed-out window-curtain and the rain streaming on the panes so thickly as to shut out the view, presented an aspect quite capable of depressing sensitive nerves. Upon a row of nails on the wall most of Miss Farthingall's wardrobe was suspended. Florence could not help seeing the torn lining and the fringed-out hems, but so determined was she to be pleased with the wearer of those dresses that, instead of awakening any feeling of disapprobation, these details only stirred her pity anew. The cotton dress which had just been taken off still hung over a chair-back—tidiness was evidently not the schoolmistress's strong point—"but then, who knows if I would be tidy

myself," reflected Florence, "if I had to keep my own things in order!"

The table bore further evidence to this failing of Miss Farthingall. Although the tea would have to be served there in a few minutes, it was at this moment still littered with books and papers, as well as with what had probably been the contents of her pocket at the moment she changed her dress. Florence's glance passed over it all, with a timid, shrinking interest. Then she turned away and sat down, and began to think of the day after to-morrow.

Presently she roused herself to the observation that Miss Farthingall was taking a long time to get the tea ready. Surely she had been away for quite a quarter of an hour, and it was late, at any rate, to-day. Florence rose and went to the window, but there was nothing to be seen through the streaming pane. Then she came back to the table, and idly took up one of the books that lay there. In doing so she caught sight of something which caused her to stiffen into attention. Among the books and the papers there was a green ribbon lying, of exactly the shade of the one which she had seen on the schoolmistress's neck. She took it up quickly, and saw that there hung upon it a small and somewhat battered silver locket, ornamented with a star in carbuncles. The matter was quite plain. While changing her dress Miss Farthingall had pulled this off, by mistake, probably, and then, in her haste, had left it lying on the table. Florence, realizing the situation, coloured with excitement. A locket was exactly the thing she had expected to see suspended by that ribbon, and in the locket there would doubtless be the portrait of the

faithless man whom she had vowed to bring to justice. To be sure, there was no more than the shadow of a chance of her being able to give a name to the face, but even to see it was something. For just one second she hesitated, but the temptation was too great, the chance too extraordinary.

"It's her own fault," she said aloud, in order to convince herself that she was doing nothing to be ashamed of; "I gave her fair warning." And then, somewhat guiltily, she touched the spring of the locket.

But the guilty feeling passed immediately. She had evidently made a mistake, after all. Here had she been prepared to see the features of poor Miss Farthingall's faithless lover, whereas, instead of this, she found herself gazing on the face of her own faithful Louis. The real understanding of the situation could not come to her in the first minute,—for that, the two ideas lay too far apart. So far from suspecting the truth was she, that, in the very first instant, an exclamation of pleasure had escaped her at sight of the beloved face. In the second instant, indeed, she felt confused and even perplexed, but not precisely alarmed. How did this come to be here? And was it really Louis?

She carried the locket to the window and looked at it more closely. Yes; of that there could be no doubt. In her recollection at home—the "Louis Gallery," as her father had nicknamed it, and which showed the young baronet in various stages of his existence, beginning with petticoat days and ending with the latest London "cabinet"—she had the duplicate of this. It was a comparatively modern portrait, dat-

ing from some half-dozen years back, when he wore a different shape of moustache, but it was much more faded than her own copy.

She was still standing at the window in deep perplexity when the door opened to admit Miss Farthingall and the tea-tray. Florence never thought of looking round until she heard a sharp exclamation behind her. In the same instant the tea-tray was put down anyhow on the table, and the schoolmistress, starting forward, snatched the open locket from her hand.

Then only she began slowly to understand—to understand, but not yet to believe. The colour ebbed gradually from her cheeks, as she turned and looked at Miss Farthingall with dazed, questioning eyes.

The other had sunk down on a chair and covered her face with her hands. The fatal green ribbon was still visible between her fingers.

"It is my own fault," she answered. "I never meant to let you know—never! And now my carelessness has done it!"

"*What* did you not mean to let me know?"

"This—this unhappy secret. Oh! do you not see now that I had to be silent?"

Florence still stared incredulously. It was too difficult to believe without warning, too hard to identify those two separate people—the wretch who had betrayed Miss Farthingall, and the chivalrous and high-minded Louis, *her* Louis—as one and the same individual.

"Do you mean to say," she asked, after a moment's desperate grappling with the problem—"do you mean to say that it is *he?*"

"Would you believe me if I denied it *now?*" asked

Miss Farthingall, in a stifled voice. She had buried her face now on the back of the chair. "You know that I never meant to speak, but chance has been too strong for me; and you know also that I do not pretend to have any claims, that I have long been resigned——"

"That is not the question," interrupted Florence, in a voice so harsh that it surprised herself. "The question is—Is this man, of whom you have spoken to me as your betrayer, the same man whose portrait you have in this locket? Is his name Sir Louis Hepburne?"

The schoolmistress buried her face a little deeper without answering.

"Answer me!" said Florence, in a tone of command quite new to Miss Farthingall's ears.

"Yes," she murmured, with a rising feeling of surprise.

"And it was because of *him* that you left England for Australia five years ago?"

"Yes."

"That is all I want to know. I think I had better be going now. I suppose the pony-carriage is outside?"

The schoolmistress got up hastily. "You are not going already?" she asked in obvious consternation. "You are not going to—do anything?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think yet."

It was in order to be able to think that she felt the urgent need of being alone immediately. She had already remembered that Louis had a batch of Scotch cousins somewhere in the North, that he had spoken of his visits to them. She had remembered

also how Miss Farthingall had recognized his photograph on the mantlepiece—the pieces were beginning to fit into each other. Probably other things would occur to her, if only she could manage to think it out.

"You must not go without forgiving me for my unfortunate carelessness," Miss Farthingall was saying. "It is that which bears the whole fault. Am I to lose your friendship as well as everything else?"

She came towards Florence with outstretched hands as she spoke; but Florence shrank away.

"I tell you that I know nothing. I must first collect my thoughts a little. Will you be so kind as to see whether the pony-carriage is at the door?"

Miss Farthingall gave her a quick glance of alarm. The new haughtiness of the tone touched her like cold water.

"And you will not even have a cup of tea before your wet drive?" she ventured, almost diffidently.

"No, thank you; I don't require any tea. I have told you that I am going at once."

In silence the schoolmistress followed her guest to the door. There was a frown of perplexity on her face as she watched the pony-carriage crossing the bridge, under whose grey arches the swollen waters rolled dark and yellow.

Up to this moment the game had been entirely in her hand; she had been able to foresee almost every turn it would take. Now for the first time she felt baffled. There had been something in Florence's manner to-day which she had not foreseen. It was not exactly in this way that she had expected her to face the discovery. Some element was here on which she had not counted. Did it mean victory or defeat?

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRYST.

It was between the *entré* and the joint that evening that Florence abruptly asked her father—

"What is the name of those cousins of Louis's who live in Scotland?"

"The Macallans? What makes you think of them just now?"

"They happened to come into my head. Does Louis visit them often?"

"Never, except in the grouse season, I believe."

"There are daughters, are there not?"

"Yes; but that needn't make you feel uneasy," said Mr. Crossley, with a tenderly sly smile. "They're scarcely out of the schoolroom yet."

"But they've got governesses, I suppose?"

"Yes, and a pack of trouble they bring. One of them eloped last year with the bailiff, and another one—let me see, what was the story about the other one? Ah, to be sure, it was that rascal Louis himself who was a trifle gone upon her, I believe. I remember his father mentioning the subject in a letter; but that was before he had seen you, mind." And the old gentleman smiled fondly and proudly into his daughter's face.

She responded with a blank stare, while she felt her hands growing cold. It tallied too horribly well. After that she forgot to speak for a time. All she was aware of as yet was the necessity of disentangling her ideas and coming to some sort of conclusion before her meeting with Louis. Two nights and one day lay between her and that moment. Her father must not guess anything, she told herself, until she knew what she was going to do, and as yet she had no idea; but, despite all her efforts to keep up conversation, she found herself for ever relapsing into the same train of thought. Was it actually possible? Could Louis, who was so noble, so absolutely high-minded, have acted in the way described? But, immediately upon this question, there followed another—*Why*, after all, had she taken for granted that he was both noble and high-minded? What did she know of him beyond his face and his protestations of love? Looking at the matter closely now, she was forced to acknowledge to herself that, though he was her future husband, he really was a stranger to her. Six weeks ago she had seen him for the first time, and of these he had been out of her sight for three. That first meeting had been so decisive, the brief courtship so headlong in its impetuosity, that she had never had time to recover her breath, as it were, never had the chance of examining this man with the coolly critical gaze with which we measure our acquaintances; he had, in fact, never been an acquaintance, having, from a stranger, stepped straight into the place of a lover. For anything she positively knew, he might possess a whole score of the very blackest qualities allotted to mankind. Well, and supposing it were so——

She awoke to the fact that her father was gazing at her inquiringly across the table.

"You are certainly very low to-night, child. Probably you caught cold this afternoon. Nobody but you would have thought of going out in this weather. Or are you, perhaps, fretting because of that business in the village?"

"What business in the village?" she asked, with an effort.

"What? Does Miss Providence actually not know that another of her matches has gone wrong? Hughes was here this afternoon with some rigmarole about that young couple whom you settled in the White Cottage last winter. I forget whether it's he who has been helping himself to her hair, or she who wanted to get at his eyes, but anyway, the battle seems to have been pretty hot."

"I must see about it to-morrow," said Florence, in something like her usual tone; but the light, scarcely risen to her eyes, went out again immediately. It was too difficult to take interest in other people's affairs when her own were in such a desperate predicament.

The sight of dessert was a relief scarcely to be awaited.

"There will be more colour in those cheeks the day after to-morrow at this time," said Mr. Crossley, with a twinkle in his eye, as she passed him on her way to the door.

"Perhaps," she said, trying bravely to smile.

"Would there?" she asked herself, alone in the drawing-room. What would have happened by the day after to-morrow at this time? It all depended

upon what she decided, and of course she must decide something soon. If only she could have an idea of what she was going to do!

The idea had not come to her when at length she found herself alone in her bedroom, free to do with the night hours what she liked. Now only did a real facing of the situation become possible. Something, indeed, had already occurred to her, but at first sight she had simply taken fright and looked away, and some little time passed before she had gathered strength to look again.

Give him up? It seemed too impossible to be seriously thought of, and yet she found herself thinking of it continually. Presently she had reached the point of asking herself whether, as matters now stood, she had even any further right to her lover. *Her* lover? Why, he was not her lover at all. Looked at by the light of these revelations, he was Miss Farthingall's lover, and it was that fair-haired little schoolmistress—wasn't her hair rather *too* fair, after all?—who had the prior claim. Had not she herself, while still ignorant of the culprit's name, pleaded for an appeal to his betrothed wife, and argued that such an appeal could not be refused? And could the revelation of the name alter anything in the situation?

No, it could not, she told herself, while with clenched teeth she lay back on her pillow, staring, wide-eyed, at the ceiling of her room. And why, after all, should it be so hard to give him up, since he was a villain? He must be a villain if he had acted as Miss Farthingall described. And then her thoughts turned to the episode itself, which the schoolmistress's broken narrative and scattered remarks had left

shrouded in a certain becoming atmosphere of mystery, well calculated to heighten curiosity. What exact shade of blackness his villainy had reached she did not know, and did not even care to know; he had wrecked this girl's life through his fickleness, and, according to Florence's code of justice, this was enough.

The hours passed, and she still lay there, intensely wide awake, with mind and memory working at that high pressure which is known only to sleepless nights. Picture chased picture in her feverish thoughts—Louis, as she had first set eyes on him; the small distant figure on the Stonefield Road, which had afterwards became Miss Farthingall; her father's anxious face looking at her across the dinner-table last night; Louis giving her the farewell kiss on the terrace (was it to be the last she was ever to get?); the green ribbon lying on the table among the books. Here her thoughts stood still for a moment. Was it in that dark wretched hole of a room that the woman who had been Louis's first love was to go on dragging out her existence, while she herself, by virtue of his fickleness, lived alongside, bedded in the luxury of his proud home? The thought was unbearable, not so much because her heart felt soft towards Miss Farthingall—strangely enough it did not feel nearly so soft towards her personally as it had felt, say, this time yesterday—but simply because it was a crying injustice.

Suddenly, without warning, another picture stood before her—the gaunt haggard face and fierce blue eyes of Mrs. Gillett. "You, too, will have to be the misfortune of some one or other, be sure of that!"

The words sounded in her ears as though she had heard them only yesterday. "Your share of luck is too big for one person, therefore, some one else will have to pay for it." And when she had asked how this could be, the answer had been, "Perhaps you will get a fortune which some other person expects, or perhaps the man you love will be loved by another woman, whose heart will break when he marries you. Anyway, it is sure to be."

"But it shall not be!" said Florence in her heart. Something of the childish, almost superstitious awe with which every utterance of her old nurse had filled her, had come over her now in the silence and solitude of the night. It seemed to her almost as though she were again staring through the fender-bars at the glowing nursery fire, as though the very reflection of the red coals must be on her face.

This was the woman who had to pay for her own over-great share of luck; in one moment it had become clear to her.

"But it shall not be!" she said again, repeating the words aloud; and, a few minutes later, she had fallen into exhausted sleep. At last she knew what she was going to do.

That evening, at dinner, Mr. Crossley had no reason to complain either of his daughter's want of colour or of her silence. Her cheeks were so bright, and her tongue so ready, that a more observant person might possibly have discovered a slightly feverish element in her gaiety. Depression and bewilderment had given place to that dash of intoxication which almost invariably accompanies any decisive resolution, regardless of its nature and consequences. The effort

required to string herself up to the point reached had acted as a stimulant upon her nerves, to the extent of quite drowning for the time the sense of suffering. It certainly did strike Mr. Crossley that Flo's eyes were shining in a rather unusual manner, but that was easily explained by the circumstances.

"To-morrow!" he said tenderly, while pressing her hand at parting, and wondering to feel it so hot.

"Yes, to-morrow!" repeated Florence, with a smile which dazzled him, but which he could not quite understand.

She had arranged even the details of her plan by now. Early next morning she despatched a groom on horseback with a note to Sir Louis, who, as she knew, would have reached home late at night. Sir Louis smiled blissfully as he read it. He was requested to meet her that afternoon between three and four—this was urgently necessary, etc. What an unnecessary trouble to take! Did she really suppose that he was waiting for an invitation? And why be so particular about the hour?

As three o'clock approached, Florence sat rigid in her room. The colour was gone from her set lips, and her heart was beating at an insupportable rate. There wanted only ten minutes to the hour, when the consciousness seized her that the thing could not happen here. The sight of the four walls stifled her, and, besides, it was not safe—they might be overheard. Springing to her feet, she snatched up a hat, and almost ran from the house, leaving a message for Sir Louis, who would find her in the Long Walk.

The Long Walk began quite close to the house, and cut right through the park, plunging deep into

its more thickly wooded part, and running the whole time as straight as an avenue. Indeed, it had been an avenue at one time, but had fallen into disuse as an approach. Its once sharply defined double line of oaks had gradually melted into the mixed forest of ash trees and birches springing up all around, while the encroaching sward had drawn a broad green band down each side of the reduced road, on which no carriage wheels had left their mark for fifty years past. Twilight reigned here even at midday, and, owing to the absence of turns, any approaching person could be seen from afar. No better place could be chosen for an interview, which not improbably might turn out rather stormy. Florence told herself this as she reached the massive wooden seat, which had been fashioned from one of the fallen oaks of the old avenue, and which had been her goal, for the Long Walk ended in a *cul de sac.* A disused gate, wrapped just now in a cloak of white bindweed in full bloom, rose at a few paces' distance, barring the passage to the outer park.

Here she sat down and waited, with her eyes on the long expanse of walk she had just traversed. Yes; this was the right place. It was very hot and very still here just now; the thick ranks of trees stood motionless, except when from time to time a light puff of air swept through the wood. There would be dead silence in one moment; in the next she could hear from afar the light rustle of the approaching breeze, and could watch one tree after another being caught, until those close at hand were in motion, only to sink again, one by one, back into repose. Sometimes it would be one single birch that was touched by a stray breath of air, and shivered audibly as though in the

cold fit of a fever, all its sensitive leaves in motion, while an oak tree beside it stood immovable in its majesty. Summer sights and summer sounds were all around. Deep down in the warm grasses the grasshoppers were chirping shrilly; white butterflies circled round the white bindweed on the old gate, making it look as though half the blossoms had taken wing; on the green borders of the walk pink-headed grasses drooped with each breath of air into new and wonderful patterns, crossing and recrossing each other's slender stems in every imaginable curve and at every imaginable angle. Presently the cloud of butterflies dispersed in affright; a cow had put its sleepy brown head over the gate, and looked at Florence inquiringly, as though asking her what it was she was waiting for.

She had sat for scarcely five minutes when far off on the straight walk she saw Louis coming along under the trees, and—so hard is it to get rid of the habit of happiness—her heart leapt at the sight. But the next moment it had sunk down, heavy as a stone. "To be sure; I forgot," she murmured to herself apologetically.

Instinctively she had half risen to meet him; but at that thought she sank down again, and sat waiting for his approach in a mixture of terror and of desperate hope. Perhaps, after all, it was all a mistake; perhaps there was another Sir Louis Hepburne in the world who had committed these atrocities. The wildest surmises shot through her mind during the last seconds of suspense. Seeing him again made it so much more difficult to believe in his guilt.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE LONG WALK.

In her plan it had been settled that she was going to behave with the greatest reserve at the moment of meeting; but when the moment came she suddenly found herself in Louis's arms, returning his strong kisses with a vehemence of which she had never suspected herself. It was wicked, of course, considering what she meant to do. She was aware of it the whole time, but it was impossible to prevent; "and probably it was for the last time," she told herself by way of stifling conscience.

"Sweetheart! My little one!" was all that Sir Louis could say during that first breathless minute. He had expected to see her excited, of course, but he had not expected to see her like this. He felt that he was being kissed in the way that women kiss their lovers, or mothers their sons, when they start for the wars, and he could not understand why this should be so.

"The idea of first sending me a polite invitation, and then running away from me to the end of the park," he began laughingly, as soon as he was able. "What will you be up to next, child? All this sort of thing is far too solemn for my taste."

"It wouldn't have done in the house," said Florence, abruptly letting go her hold upon his arm, and with a supreme effort recovering some of her composure.

"But you did send for me, did you not?"

"Of course I did. I have sent for you, Louis, to ask you a question."

"A question that couldn't be asked in the house? This is becoming more and more mysterious! May I answer it sitting?"

She had already taken her place on the bench; but as he followed her example, he saw her shrink away nervously from his vicinity, and understood the movement as little as he had understood the passionate vehemence of her greeting. The intensity with which she now turned her eyes upon him was a fresh surprise.

"Tell me, Louis," she began, doing her best to keep her voice steady; "tell me truly, do you know any person called Miss Farthingall?"

The moment of suspense that followed was so torturing that she bit her underlip till the blood came, without noticing it. There was no breeze under way just then, so that even the birches stood motionless, and the only thing that broke the perfect silence of the summer afternoon was the gentle sound of munching from the old gate over there, where the brown cow was feeding at leisure upon the leaves of creeping plants.

At sound of the name just pronounced, Florence's jealously watching eyes saw something like a flash of recollection pass over her lover's face. He drew his brows together, and appeared to be thinking.

"Farthingall?" he repeated, after an endless

half-minute. "Yes, surely I know the name. I'll have it in a moment, if you'll only give me time."

"Think of Scotland!"

"Scotland! why, bless my heart, wasn't Farthingall the name of the Macallans' governess?"

"Then you admit it?" cried Florence, in a quick tone of agony. The last shred of hope was gone; there was no mistake, after all; no other Sir Louis Hepburne in the question.

"Admit what? What are you talking about, Florence?"

"I am talking about a cruel wrong that has been done to a helpless girl. Oh, it was a good thing that you went away, Louis, otherwise I might never have found out what sort of a man you really are."

And hereupon, in a voice that shook with badly suppressed excitement, with quivering lips and shining eyes, she told him the schoolmistress's story almost in one breath, setting forth the sufferings she had undergone, dwelling on her immovable fidelity and undying affection; and, on the strength of these facts, courageously pleading her cause.

Sir Louis listened in profound astonishment. He had almost forgotten the face of the Macallans' pretty governess, who had made that dead set at him five years ago, and certainly he had had no idea that his somewhat desultory attentions at that time had compromised the girl to anything like this extent. It scarcely sounded likely that her reputation should have suffered as badly as all this; but he admitted to himself that it was not quite impossible. Neither had he ever flattered himself that she still remembered his existence. Undying affection, eternal fidelity—some-

how she hadn't—looked like that sort of thing; it put the half-forgotten matter into quite a new and not particularly agreeable light, all the less agreeable because of her having turned up again in this awkward manner at his very gates. In the story which Florence was telling him he figured as a full-blown villain, and yet—although he did not recognize himself in the portrait—there was no single point which he could put his finger on as an absolute lie. The facts were more or less right; it was only the colouring put upon them that was all wrong; the lights required to be shifted, that was all. It was not that that disturbed him, so much as the idea of having made such a deep impression against his will; the discovery was distinctly unwelcome, and yet he must have been either more or less than a man if it had failed to touch both his vanity and his feelings.

"Poor girl!" was all he said, when Florence at length drew breath.

"Why do you tell me all this now?" he asked, having sat thoughtful for some moments.

"Because, of course, all is over between us now. I could never marry a man who by rights belongs to another woman."

The momentary emotion passed from his face, leaving it a trifle grim in expression.

"In other words: you want to give me up?"

"It's not a question of wanting; I have no choice."

"And you imagine that by giving me up you will force me to marry Miss Farthingall? I suppose you think that you can settle my affairs for me as easily as you settle those of your village *protégés*. Has

it not occurred to you that two are required for a bargain?"

Apparently it had not occurred to Florence. It was characteristic of her that, having once decided upon her own course of action, she should regard the rest of the matter as clenched.

"Do you want me to understand that Miss Farthingall actually has the face to *claim* me as a husband?" asked Sir Louis, with an ominous light in his eyes.

"Oh no, Louis," Florence hastened to explain, afraid of having placed the matter in a false light. "She claims nothing at all. It was I who got her to tell me her story, quite against her will, and even then nothing could induce her to tell me the name; it was by a mere chance that I found it out, and she was just awfully distressed."

"Hum—now, look here, Florence, you have had your say, and now it is my turn to talk. I see that you are a good deal excited, so I will let some of the expressions you have used pass muster. I am not dreaming of denying my acquaintance with Miss Farthingall, and I admit that I found her very pretty in those days, and let her see that I thought so, but even your version of the story has not convinced me that I'm a blackguard. You always tell me that I'm too matter of fact for your taste; perhaps that is the reason why I cannot for the life of me catch the sense of my supposed guilt. Every man goes through a dozen flirtations before he comes to anchor, and if I were expected to marry every pretty girl I have made pretty speeches to in my life, why, I would need a harem to keep them in."

"This is dreadful!" murmured Florence, in genuine consternation. She was at the age at which one takes for granted that the man of one's choice has been stone-blind to every other female fellow-creature all along.

"It is not nearly so dreadful as you suppose. I don't pretend to have been a saint, but I suppose you will believe me when I tell you that my code of honour hasn't as much as a crack in it so far."

"It is evident that our codes do not agree."

"There exists no code which can make of a harmless flirtation a capital offence. That business with Miss Farthingall was nothing more."

"That is what men always say when they are called to account," replied Florence, with the conviction of eighteen.

"And what do women say on these occasions?" asked Sir Louis, and then stopped short abruptly. This would have been the right moment for shifting the lights, but no, hang it all, it wouldn't be fair play. Nothing would have been easier than to speak of the inviting glances which had first turned his youthful head, and to describe the playful ambushes laid for him by his little cousins' fair-haired governess; but—the girl might be an arrant flirt; she certainly had given him that impression in former days—but it would never do to tell tales. Besides, even should he descend to that, would he be believed?

"Women are always the victims," was Florence's ready reply.

"You seem to have learnt a lot since I went away," he said with a laugh which was only half angry.

As yet he could not manage to take the matter quite seriously, as to feel alarmed by the announcement of her resolution—it seemed too preposterous that a few weeks of boyish foolishness long ago should bear so bitter a harvest. Despite the short acquaintance, he knew her pretty well, and he made the mistake of believing that he knew her quite well. This was just one of her quixotically romantic fancies which would, of course, yield to reason. Acting on this conviction, he now began to argue with her indeed, but as one argues with a child, patiently, yet with a touch of that superiority of tone which betrays a half-tender, half-amused depreciation of the other's point of view, and which is so peculiarly irritating to some temperaments. Had he been such a connoisseur in women as Florence evidently suspected him of being, he would not have argued at all, but only protested—on his knees, if necessary, and, ten to one, the battle would have been his, but being too conscientious to rely entirely upon an appeal to her feelings, and considering himself bound to remove her scruples, he blundered into directing his appeal to her reason instead, with the result that Florence's face grew harder, minute by minute, as she listened, while all the answer she made was—

"It cannot be—you don't belong to me!"

Within herself she wondered to find him so brazen-faced; she had expected to see him confounded by his guilty conscience, but, of course, this only showed what a hardened wrong-doer he was.

"My husband must be an honourable man!" she burst out at length in a moment of irritation, hard pressed by his persistence.

"Take care!" was his answer, in a voice which she had not heard before, while his face darkened for the first time since the beginning of the interview. "Even though you *are* my future wife, that is no especial reason for insulting me."

"I am not your future wife," she murmured sullenly, though the change of tone and mien frightened her a little.

"We shall see about that. I am not yet aware of having released you from your engagement."

"You cannot marry me against my will."

"I fancy that I shall be able to do so with your will yet."

"I have told you that it cannot be."

"And you imagine that I shall accept that as your last word?"

"It *is* my last word."

Sir Louis folded his arms and frowned thoughtfully at the gravel. The matter really was a little puzzling.

"Look here, Florence," he began after a pause, which again had only been filled by the steady munching of the cow, "I absolutely decline to abide by this conclusion to-day. You are acting on some absurd impulse which, although it does every honour to your heart, does not speak quite so highly for your head. A week's reflection will probably bring you to your senses. At the end of that time I shall accept your decision, whatever it is; but, mind, it must be final. I am not very fond of being played fast and loose with, and be sure you don't imagine that you can dismiss me one day and recall me the next. When you have made your choice, you must abide by it."

"I have made it already; why wait a whole week?"

"Because only on this condition will I give you back your word. And I also make the further condition that the matter remain between ourselves until then. No one, not even your father, is to suspect that any change is being contemplated. And as for my mother"—the look of trouble deepened on his face—"there is nothing for it but to avoid a meeting between you and her—for one week this will be manageable; she will require a day or two, at any rate, to recover from the journey."

"But the other people—how are they not to suspect? It will be like playing a farce, and I can't act a bit."

"You must just do your best, and I shall keep out of your way, if you like, as much as I can. Anyway, these are my conditions—do you agree to them?"

"Yes," said Florence, a little doubtfully.

She would have liked to protest against the unnecessary delay, but Louis had relapsed into that strange tone, the sort of tone which one uses towards a child which is not only unreasonable, but also unruly. She knew instinctively that if she refused he would get angry, and she had never seen him angry yet, and felt that she would rather not.

"This day week, then," he remarked in an entirely final tone. "And at this hour. Where shall it be?"

Florence looked about her.

"Let it be here again. Nobody can listen."

"Very well: the same hour and the same place. And now I suppose we had better be getting back to

the house, and together, too, in case we are seen from the windows."

The Long Walk had never appeared so long to Florence as it did that day while she traversed it in silence by the side of her silent lover. In her heart she felt that this was the beginning of the farce.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCHOOL FEAST.

Sir Louis found his promise of keeping out of Florence's way most inconvenient in practice—nevertheless he stuck to it—for not only had he promised, but also he was of opinion, that there would be more chance of her coming to her senses if she was left to herself—"allowed to sulk it out," as he put it. By dint, therefore, of talking of his mother's health, as well as of the business which had accumulated during his absence, he had reduced the meetings to two unavoidable dinners at Heywood, which, owing to the fortunate presence of some other chance guests, had passed over without Mr. Crossley's attention having been drawn to the greater reserve now reigning between his daughter and her betrothed.

Thus the sixth day of the "farce" had been successfully reached; but this day was destined to be the most trying of all for Florence. For nearly a century past the 1st of July—as the birthday of Cecil Crossley, the founder and generous patron of Heywood village school—had been the day fixed for the great school-feast, annually held in the grounds of Heywood Hall, and in which, by a habit which had become traditional, the neighbouring parish of Stone-

field invariably joined. There was nothing to be altered, either about the date or about the fact—both were inevitable. And it was inevitable, too, that Sir Louis, as the latest master of Stonefield, newly returned to the home of his ancestors, and about, moreover, to unite his lot to that of the future mistress of Heywood, should at least put in an appearance on the occasion. On the whole he did not much mind. This ridiculous farce would be played out to-morrow, at any rate, and *he* had no objection to meeting Florence. He would also have to meet Miss Farthingall, that was clear; but even that was scarcely an objection. Hitherto he had avoided the new schoolmistress so successfully as not even to have set eyes on her, although she lived at a stone's throw from his windows; but, of course, he could not go on avoiding her for ever, and this was as good an opportunity as any other for getting over a meeting which, however innocent he might feel himself, could not but be a trifle awkward. A crowd is known to be a help on these occasions. Besides, it was undeniable that he felt mildly curious. Since those revelations made in the Long Walk, it was only natural that his thoughts should have returned more than once to the picture drawn of the little governess's unswerving devotion and bleeding heart. It was hard to believe, but it could not fail to be an interesting subject of speculation; and although he was not aware of wishing to find out the truth, he told himself that he probably would find it out whenever he saw her.

Twelve o'clock was the hour settled for the gathering of the children in front of the Heywood schoolhouse, but it was not until past two that Sir Louis

stepped out of his dogcart at the door of the Hall. By this time the march round the village, as well as the religious part of the ceremony, was over, and the scene had been transferred to the park, where cloths had been spread on the grass, and some four hundred hungry children were falling tooth and nail on the mountains of buns and pyramids of mutton-pies provided by the munificent but invisible Mr. Crossley, who, after a minute's unavoidable appearance on the doorstep to the sound of ringing cheers—during which he only just managed not to stop his ears—had fled to the depths of his beloved study, which fortunately lay so far to the back of the straggly building, that even the brass band on the lawn sounded as harmless as a distant barrel-organ, while the shrill hum of young voices might have been taken for the buzzing of summer gnats.

The whole burden of hospitality lay on Florence's shoulders, but it was one to which she was well used, and in which Mr. Hughes had supported her from time immemorial. It was on such occasions that the vicar's extra large supply of Christian charity found its proper outlet, making the distributing of pies and the filling of glasses so intense a pleasure to him that there almost seemed a danger of his cheeks being cracked by the broadness of his smiles. His eyes seemed to be everywhere: not even the smallest child at the farthest end of the lawn could be in want of a bun without his darting to the rescue. If only he had not lost so much time in easing his anxiety with regard to everybody's health, he would have been a more perfect helper still; nothing but Florence's peremptoriness prevented him from asking each of the

four hundred schoolchildren separately, not only how he or she felt, but also whether his or her parents were in a fairly satisfactory state. Even as it was, he had already managed to ascertain the physical condition of every teacher of both schools, as well as of all the clerical personages present.

With her adjutant beside her, Florence moved about from group to group. Her colour to-day was somewhat heightened, and, as she passed and repassed across the lawn, she never failed to glance towards the avenue. She knew that Louis was coming, and she knew that this was going to be the first meeting between him and Miss Farthingall. This was a great day in more senses than merely being the day of the school-feast.

From over there, where a small white figure flitted backwards and forwards between the groups of Stonefield school-children, like a butterfly that scarcely skimmed the grass, there were other glances being thrown towards the avenue. The schoolmistress also knew who was expected, and likewise understood the significance of the occasion. This past week had been to her one of uncertainty and suspense, leaving her, up to this moment, completely in the dark as to Florence's intentions. Since the day of her abrupt departure from the school-house, Miss Farthingall had not ceased to puzzle over her confidant's change of manner, as well as over the cessation of her visits. To provoke an explanation would not be prudent, she felt, so there had been nothing for it but to wait patiently for to-day, which, as she knew, must bring about a meeting, and would show her in one moment whether all was yet lost or not.

It would have been hard to say which of two hearts was beating fastest as the dogcart at length drew up at the door. When picturing the scene, Florence had always seen herself advancing to meet Louis hand-in-hand with the schoolmistress, and saying, with a meaning glance, "Louis, this is Miss Farthingall!" —but it happened quite differently, for in the first place Miss Farthingall was away at the other end of the lawn, and in the second place she became aware that her courage was not equal to the occasion.

Within a minute of having alighted, Louis was by her side.

"Give me that basket of sweet stuff, Hughes," he gaily began, attempting to possess himself of the vicar's burden. "You may consider yourself off duty now, for of course this is *my* business."

"Oh, dear Sir Louis, how *are* you?" exclaimed Mr. Hughes, fervently, clinging with one hand to his basket, while with the other he wrung Sir Louis's. "are you certain you are *quite* well?"

"Yes, quite; and strong enough to fight with you for those cakes, or whatever they are, if necessary."

"What a comfort! Must I really give him the basket, Miss Crossley? Am I dismissed?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Florence, a little stiffly. "Thank you very much, Louis, but I am getting on very well with Mr. Hughes."

"Is this to punish me for my tardiness? I positively couldn't get away sooner."

"You know quite well that it isn't that," said Florence, steadily returning his gaze. "It is simply

that I don't need you. I daresay you can find employment elsewhere."

"I don't mean to look for it, then. Why, what would people say if they saw me dancing attendance on any one but you? We must consider appearances, my dear Flo!"

He said it jestingly, in a tone calculated for Mr. Hughes' ears, but with a glance of warning which was meant for her alone.

She coloured angrily. It was exactly because she knew that her betrothed husband would be generally expected to assist her in doing the honours of the feast, that she had wished to avoid this public exposure of an engagement which in her heart she considered null.

"After to-morrow there will be no more appearances to consider," she said in a quick whisper, which reached him alone.

He looked at her, momentarily startled, and for the first time it crossed his mind that the answer which he was to receive to-morrow in the Long Walk might possibly be different from the one he had been confidently expecting all the week.

"How do you mean that?" he was beginning in the same tone, when Mr. Hughes made one of his sudden darts forward, exclaiming at the top of his voice—

"Tarts, Miss Farthingall? Gooseberry-tarts? I've plenty of them here. Take them, by all means, and I'll forage for myself."

Sir Louis and Florence turned at the same moment, and there, close at hand, stood the little schoolmistress, in her childishly simple white gown, her pale golden hair creeping out from under the brim

of the straw hat, while with a deprecating smile and pleading eyes, she held out her empty basket towards the vicar.

This was the moment, then. Florence felt the angry colour dying out of her cheeks.

"I—I believe you know Miss Farthingall," was all she managed to stammer, while a dense haze rose before her eyes.

She heard a vague murmur, and when the haze passed again she saw that Louis had replaced his hat on his head, and withdrawn the hand he had put out to meet Miss Farthingall's timidly proffered fingers. The two were looking at each other in silence; he with a glance which might almost have been interpreted as inimical, she with dilated blue eyes, in which various emotions, and among them most prominently surprise—a pleasurable and excited surprise—were broadly written. It was only for one second; in the next already the telltale eyes were dropped guiltily to the ground, while the owner waited submissively until she should be addressed.

"You have only been a short time in this part of the country, I believe," began Sir Louis, a trifle grimly. "I trust you do not find the Stonefield schoolhouse too utterly uncomfortable. We shall be building another one of these days."

"Oh, it does very well," was the modest reply, given in that gently resigned tone of voice which says quite plainly, "Anything is good enough for *me!*"

"And how about those gooseberry-tarts, Hughes?" inquired Sir Louis, who, despite his assumption of coolness, was not feeling entirely comfortable. "Is it you or Miss Farthingall who is to have

them? And is it you or I who is to attend on Miss Crossley? You'll have to make your choice between us, Florence!" And he looked at her with laughing defiance.

"I have already told you that I mean to keep Mr. Hughes."

"In that case you can't do better than carry Miss Farthingall's tarts for her. Here! I'll give you up the basket on that condition."

Sir Louis bit his moustache, but of course there was nothing for it but to say "Delighted!" The schoolmistress said nothing at all, and carefully kept her eyes on the ground. Thus, two minutes later, somewhat to his surprise, Sir Louis found himself tramping across the lawn by the side of the woman who claimed to have been his first love, and chained to her side by the basket of gooseberry-tarts on his arm.

Florence tried hard not to look after them. Nothing could have happened more perfectly, she told herself, and wondered why she did not feel more elated.

It was not until half an hour later that she saw Louis again. By this time the feeding stage was over, and that of mere frolic had set in. Small high-toned voices rang back from the broad stems of the beeches, while the Heywood lawns were alive with clean pinafores and happy, perspiring faces. The time had come for the stewards of the feast to rest and refresh themselves. Round the long table spread on the terrace they slowly assembled, dropping in singly or in pairs, as they happened to get free. Miss Farthingall and Sir Louis were among the last to appear, and there being only two empty places remaining by this time,

it appeared unavoidable that he should sit by her side. This again was an arrangement almost as perfect as it could be, but again it brought a pang to Florence's illogical heart. She was not aware of the strain of anxiety in her eyes as she looked across the table to where Sir Louis was still standing beside the last empty chair, doubtfully pulling his moustache, and apparently not in the best of tempers. At that moment he was probably contemplating an abrupt withdrawal from the scene, but that look of Florence's decided him, by putting a sudden idea into his head. She evidently didn't like the notion of his sitting beside Miss Farthingall; very well, then, he would punish her by doing it—she deserved it richly for her treatment of him that afternoon. And without giving himself time for further reflection, he took the vacant chair, and asked Miss Farthingall, with unnecessary earnestness, whether she wanted sugar in her tea. Had any one been watching, it might have been noticed that at the moment of his decision Florence's face had grown a shade paler, and that of the schoolmistress a trifle pinker than the heat of the July sun had yet succeeded in making them. Every one else present showed signs of feeling the temperature; the white waistcoat of Mr. Ward, the parish doctor, was heaving portentously, while the vicar exhaustedly but smilingly polished his shining crown with an extra large handkerchief, and the curates sat by, moist and limp from their recent efforts. Even Florence looked tired; Miss Farthingall alone was cool and fresh to look at.

In her heart of hearts Miss Ward ascribed this equality of complexion to powder. The doctor's sister

was a spinster of uncertain age, known in the neighbourhood as "the Tiger-Lily," the latter part of which nickname she owed to the fact of having been baptised Lilian, the first part to her temper, which was known to belong to the bellicose order. If to a tiger-lily she could be likened, however, it could only be to one after a peculiarly long drought, for Miss Ward belonged to that particular class of old maids who give the impression that, although when tickled they may possibly laugh, they would, if pricked, certainly not bleed. Dust, rather than blood, is what one would expect to find in the veins of this sort of women, whose very life-sap—judging from their parchment-like skin and withered looking hair—seems to have been dried up at the root ages ago. The skin on the lips of such women is always pulling off, their finger-nails are generally split. The heat of to-day had helped not only to aggravate this general impression of dryness to something almost approaching mummification—for the Miss Wards of the world never perspire, they only shrivel—but also to sharpen the warlike temper. Miss Farthingall was the most natural person to let it out upon. From the very first Miss Ward had stigmatised the new Stonefield mistress as a "young person," and everybody knew what it meant to be called a young person by the doctor's sister, whose mental energy, insufficiently occupied by the management of her brother's small household, had for years past found the necessary outlet in looking after the morals of the neighbourhood. Just lately there had been nothing very exciting agoing, so Miss Farthingall, appearing on the scene, had been pounced upon with alacrity. From the moment of setting eyes on her,

Miss Ward had scented a promising subject. Instinct and experience both told her that something interesting could scarcely fail to come from her sojourn in the neighbourhood. In the first place she was pretty, which, in Miss Ward's opinion, was in itself a suspicious circumstance; in the second place she was far too self-possessed for a schoolmistress. Miss Lee, the Heywood teacher, now sitting at the other side of the table on the edge of her chair, and thankfully drinking her tea without sugar, because nobody had remembered to give her any, and because she was far too aware of her position to ask for some, was Miss Ward's idea of what a schoolmistress should be like. Miss Farthingall was not like that at all. Not even Sir Louis's near neighbourhood seemed to confuse her. At the moment of his setting down beside her, Miss Ward's silks had audibly rustled, while her small, bullet-like head went up with a quick movement of attention. At the further sight of the gratified smile on the schoolmistress's face, her nostrils began to dilate, like those of a war-horse that smells powder. Could the young person actually imagine that Sir Louis *liked* sitting near her? It really was time that somebody took her down a peg. Pitching her voice to its most penetrating key, and getting her eye-glass well into position, Miss Ward accordingly opened fire across the table.

"You are very much to be envied, Miss Farthingall; this heat doesn't seem to affect you in the least. It is nothing, doubtless, to what you have been used to in Australia. I suppose that is why you keep so *cool*." The emphasis on the last word was, to all who knew Miss Ward, significant of a double meaning.

"Thank you," was the mild reply, "I never suffer from the heat."

"And yet to look at the consistency of your gown, one would almost suppose so."

This unavoidably called the attention of the company to what Miss Ward considered the indescent transparency of Miss Farthingall's white muslin, through whose flimsy fabric the soft outline of arms and shoulders were very plainly visible. But, although all eyes instinctively turned towards her, Miss Farthingall did not appear even to have understood that a rebuke was intended. Her voice was as sweet, and her eyes as guileless, as ever, as she gently replied—

"You are a little hard on my poor gown, Miss Ward. It has been washed so often that it has very little consistency at all remaining; and as I shan't be able to afford another this summer, what would you have me do?"

A blush rose at the words—not to the face of Miss Farthingall, however, but to that of Miss Lee, who, in pure consternation at the naïve outspokenness of the reply, grew scarlet up to her rather scanty hair-roots. Miss Ward's silks rustled once more. The glance might be deprecating and the tone lamb-like, but she was not to be taken in by anything of the sort.

"I hope that at least you have brought a jacket with you for the evening," she remarked, with a shade more shrillness of tone.

"Alas, I have none fit to be seen! I am afraid I shall have to go home as I am, unless, indeed, some one is so good as to lend me one. I might almost be bold enough to appeal to you"—and she positively

smiled across the table into the speaker's disdainful face—"only I fancy that your jacket mightn't fit me quite; it is just possible, you know, that I mightn't get it to meet."

Several glances were here naturally passed from the schoolmistress's small but exquisitely moulded figure to the flat front of the Tiger-Lily's mauve silk dress, and several throats were hastily cleared, presumably in order to smother a rising titter, for, although few people cared to tackle Miss Ward, every one enjoyed seeing her defeated.

General conversation rushed to the rescue, while the doctor's sister collapsed into quivering silence, vaguely aware that if any one had been taken down a peg, it certainly was not the schoolmistress.

Sir Louis had been among the titterers. The little governess had always amused him; indeed, it had been by amusing him that she had first caught his fancy that time five years ago. He now turned to her with some undertoned remark about her adversary, and again, as he did so, he caught Florence's eyes upon him. "Never mind!" he said to himself, a trifle savagely; "it's the very thing for her." And, tickled with his idea, he bent a little nearer to Miss Farthingall, and whispered a little lower than was absolutely necessary. To alarm her by appearing to find pleasure in the schoolmistress's society would bring her to her senses quicker than anything else. So at least believed Sir Louis, who, like all men who know a little about women, but not quite enough, was rather too apt to generalize. Because he happened to know some women with whom this treatment would undoubtedly have answered, he jumped to the conclusion that it

must answer here, too. Her manner that afternoon had shown him that it would probably need stronger measures to bring her to reason than merely a week's reflection; a little fright would do it beautifully, no doubt. It was acting on this idea that he now began deliberately laying himself out to be agreeable to his neighbour, regardless of the notice he was attracting, oblivious alike of the feelings of his quondam flame, which were being wantonly trifled with, and the signs of distress, which, despite all efforts at composure, escaped Florence from time to time. Indeed, these symptoms afforded him only a wicked pleasure; he had been tolerably patient all the week, but patience and tolerance were at an end. He felt it, and he must revenge himself on some one for what he had undergone; and this he proceeded to do, unaware that the means by which he believed he was furthering his cause were the very ones to destroy it. As the afternoon wore on, and the shadows of the beech trees stretched across the terrace, Florence's face grew harder and her lips more tightly set. Until now she had had to uphold her staggering resolution—and, despite her brave front, it had staggered more than once sorely during the trial week—only the dregs of her enthusiasm for Miss Farthingall's cause, and the consciousness that by giving up her betrothed she was handsomely paying for her too great share of luck in the world, and need henceforth be oppressed by no more sense of debt. Now, however, watching Louis's studiously attentive glances, and attempting vainly to catch the sound of confidential-looking speeches, which she unavoidably took for far more than they were worth, there slowly became added to every-

thing else the conviction that the break could be no great sacrifice to Louis, since it was evident that his old passion was already awakening in full force; neither, while watching the fire that momentarily rose to the schoolmistress's blue eyes, could she doubt that it was returned.

"No, no," said Florence to herself, when at length she stood alone on the terrace in the gathering dusk, gazing out idly over the surface of the tumbled, paper-strewn lawn, where to-morrow morning the sparrows would be gathering round the broken buns like the vultures round the corpses on a battle-field. "No, no; those two are meant for each other, and I have no right to stand between them."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE LONG WALK AGAIN.

The Long Walk once more, but not under quite the same aspect. Yesterday's heat had been followed by a thunderstorm in the night—one of those half-hearted thunderstorms which do not quite succeed in clearing the air, and which could still be heard grumbling occasionally in the distance. The sun had not been seen to-day, while leaves and grass alike dripped from the heaviness of the short, sudden showers, which still descended from time to time with the vehemence of a burst of tears. The sky was behaving somewhat like an afflicted woman, who is for ever drying her eyes and appearing to have got over it, yet ever and again relapses into weeping. Sir Louis—first at the tryst to-day—as he paced the further end of the damp walk, which the absence of sunshine made almost as dark as a vaulted corridor, may possibly have felt a little like the fisherman in the fairy-tale, whose visits to the enchanted fish were marked by such fatally significant changes of weather. Last time he had come here as light-hearted as the butterflies that danced in the sunshine, while to-day the sky was almost as leaden as in the fairy-tale, and the bindweed on the gate hung there like sodden white

rags, its short life ended and done with; and though his heart was not exactly heavy, he was yet aware of a certain uneasiness which dated only from yesterday. In general he was a man of common sense—of even greater common sense than is usual at his age—but he had his foolish impulses, and the cold light of this morning's awakening had shown him that he had acted upon one of these impulses yesterday. Not that any unprejudiced person could have been deceived by that pretence of a flirtation; but Florence was not unprejudiced, and the look in her eyes when saying good-bye had unpleasantly arrested his attention. It was the recollection of that look which had brought him to the trysting-spot at least twenty minutes before the appointed time. Once here, however, his spirits began to rise. The nearness of the decision made it seem inconceivable that it should not turn out as he wished. Granted that he had been a trifle imprudent yesterday, it could not be difficult to make it all right again to-day, since he knew that he loved her, and did not yet doubt that she loved him. Thus thought Louis, being young and sanguine, and confident of his power over the woman he had chosen.

He was still pacing the end of the walk, throwing keen, impatient glances down the length of the shadowy approach, when unexpectedly he saw her quite close. She had reached the old avenue by a side path, and thus escaped his notice.

"Florence!" he said in joyful surprise, and advanced impetuously towards her with outstretched arms, feeling rather than telling himself that it wanted but one embrace, one meeting of eager lips, to blot all scruples from both their minds.

At sight of his movement she stood still, and he, being now near enough to see her face plainly, likewise stopped short, and let his arms sink to his sides.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence, and then, before she had spoken, Sir Louis said rapidly and low, "You *can't* mean it, Flo!"

Then with what seemed a physical, even more than a mental effort, she found her voice, and began speaking, a little hoarsely, but far too distinctly for his unwilling ears.

"I *do* mean it, Louis; you know that I do, or you would not put that question. I meant it last week already, and now I am quite sure that we do not belong to each other. It is since yesterday that I feel quite sure of it," she added, meeting his look full, with cold grey eyes.

"I knew it!" he cried, angrily returning the look, though it was himself he was angry with at the moment. Then he broke off and stood staring at her confounded. It was not the words so much that staggered him as the set purpose written on her face. It looked older already than it had done this time last week. With these new lines about her pale lips, and with her grey waterproof buttoned up to her throat, she might almost be taken for a woman of thirty. But it would be ridiculous to think of giving up yet. For a brief space longer they stood opposite to each other, beside the oaken bench, on which neither of them would have thought of sitting down to-day, even if it had not been streaming with wet; and then Sir Louis burst out—

"You cannot mean to say, surely, that you took that tomfoolery for anything *but* tomfoolery? Any

infant could surely see that I was simply in a temper, and wanted to pay you out for your coldness of the afternoon. I ought not to have done it, of course, and I'm sorrow now that I did it. There! Will that do? Abuse me as much as you like, but for goodness' sake don't let us make mountains out of mole-hills! If you want to hear again that Miss Farthingall is nothing to me, I'll repeat it as often as you tell me to!"

"I don't want to hear it, Louis; I never like to hear untruths."

"Then it *is* jealousy after all? By Jove! a pretty mess I've made of it between you two!" and he laughed harshly. "Answer me this question, Florence: Do you, or do you not, believe that I love you?"

"I dare say you think that you love me, but you are deceiving yourself; your first love will wake again —it is awaking already. Since yesterday——"

"Yesterday be d—d!" said Sir Louis, deliberately; and then, meeting her startled look, he forgot everything else, and began pleading his cause with all the passion of a hot-blooded man who sees his happiness threatened, as well as with all the persistence of a somewhat tough-fibred nature, who simply cannot believe his own defeat at the first or even at the tenth saying.

It was a different sort of appeal altogether from the one he had made to her at this same spot a week ago. Then he had spoken as to an unreasonable child; to-day it was as a man speaks to the woman he has chosen out of all others, and whom he is to lose before having fully gained her. Had he pleaded thus the

first time, all might yet have been well, for, despite her cool grey eyes, her blood was as hot as his; but the moment had been missed. Too late he began to see the mistake he had made. She was a child, indeed, so far as worldly wisdom was concerned, but the sort of child which requires to be taken seriously, for in her passions she was already a woman. The fault had lain in his over-confidence. He had thought to coax her back into good humour, to laugh her out of her delicious quixotry, not counting on the resistance of a character whose original wilfulness having never been crossed, had developed into something which could only be called by the hard name of obstinacy, nor reckoning with the deep-seated convictions, whose roots reached back into childhood. She should have been treated on a different plan from the first; he saw it now, and cursed the blindness which had led to the blunders of the whole last week, and to the crowning blunder of yesterday.

And the result of all the blunders was that slowly, very slowly, it began to dawn upon him that he was pleading in vain. Again, like last week, she shook her head and answered between her teeth, "It cannot be!"

When she had said it for the third or fourth time, he stopped speaking abruptly, and looked at her hard, as though struck by a new idea.

"If it cannot be, it is only because you do not love me," he said, after a silence.

For the first time since the beginning of the interview her stony face flushed.

"What makes you think that?" she asked in evidently genuine astonishment.

"A queer question to put to a man on the back of his dismissal!"

"But, Louis," she began in distress, honestly startled by the implication just made, "I thought I had explained everything so clearly. I am giving you up because you belong by rights to another woman, not because I do not love you. I *do* love you with all my heart, just as much as I ever did, although I know now that you don't deserve it; but I could never again find happiness in your love—don't you understand?" And she looked at him straight with pure, passionate eyes, into which her fervour had suddenly driven the tears.

Sir Louis laughed savagely.

"No—I don't understand. I suppose it is my matter-of-factness which is again in the way; but I've never heard that giving up a man is a proof of affection. Surely it would have been simpler to tell me last week that you were tired of me, instead of getting up all this comedy!"

Florence looked at him in dumb reproach. The case seemed so clear to her mind, that the idea of her love being doubted had actually never occurred to her. She stood silent now, too much hurt to speak, while Sir Louis, with an ugly look on his face, walked backwards and forwards across the breadth of the wet walk. Even to himself the idea he had propounded had only just occurred, but already it had taken such possession of his mind as to blind him to what stood written in that innocently undisguised look. To his unimaginative nature so quixotic a sacrifice was well-nigh inconceivable. There was an explanation which lay much nearer, and appeared ever so much more

plausible. She had simply never loved him, and was seizing the first opportunity of getting rid of him. The thought had cut short his stormy appeal, choking back the fiery words on his lips.

His heart was heavy within him, and his mind full of unpleasant thoughts as at last he stood still again in front of where Florence was nervously boring the point of her umbrella into the wet gravel. She would have liked to turn and fly, for her nerve had been a little shaken by the accusation hurled in her face, only she felt that the last word had not yet been spoken.

"We must make an end of this," said Sir Louis, almost roughly. "I ask you again. Will you keep your promise of becoming my wife, or will you not?"

"I will not," she replied very low, as she raised her pale, obstinate face to meet the look that was almost a scowl.

About the chin and the nostrils Sir Louis's brown skin began to show patches of pallor, while his eyes narrowed in their sockets. It was the only sign he gave of the fury which at that moment threatened to master him.

"Very well," he said after a moment, speaking a little slower than usual, as though aware that he could not trust himself. "You can do as you like, of course; you are a free Englishwoman. Only don't make the mistake of forgetting that I too am a free Englishman, and that I intend to keep my liberty of action. You can give me up if you like, but you cannot make me marry Miss Farthingall, or any one else, against my will. You may be a Miss Providence to your villagers, but, as for me, I prefer to manage my own

affairs—including my conscience—for myself; and, therefore, as I do not feel bound to marry Miss Farthingall, I shall just leave her alone. Is that clear?"

"I am sure you will do what is your duty," murmured Florence, quaking a little at the change in his manner. "You will see in time that I am right, even if you do not believe me now."

She was silent, gazing down at the wet gravel. Another shower had come on unnoticed; the heavy drops pattered on the leaves overhead, but it did not occur to Florence to open her umbrella. She still stared at the gravel, taking in the colour and form of each pebble with a painful distinctness. There seemed nothing more to say but good-bye.

"But we can be friends, can we not?" she asked, a little tremulously, moved, despite her fixed purpose, by the nearness of the last moment.

"Friends?" repeated Sir Louis, in that same deliberate manner. "No; we can never be friends. We must be lovers, or we must be strangers; there is no other choice for us two. Either we must hold each other close, or else the world is not wide enough to put between us. You have made your choice today. Good-bye, Florence; I shall never be your friend."

And, without even touching her hand, he turned, and, tramping down the long, wet grass of the bordering meadow-land, disappeared between the trees.

For a space Florence stood where he had left her, having apparently forgotten why she was here. A splash of rain in her face brought her back to actuality. She put her hand up to her cheeks, vaguely wondering why there should be hot drops among the

cold drops. After all, she had not believed that it would be quite as bad as this. It had been more commonplace on the whole than she had expected, and not quite as successful, for even now the work was only half done. Louis had not accepted his fate as she had meant him to do. He was not going to marry her; but what good would that do so long as he also did not marry Miss Farthingall?

For a little longer she stood considering, then turned back quickly towards the house, and, having reached it, ordered the pony-carriage. She was quite certain still that she had acted rightly, but a desire had come over her to seek some further assurance of the fact. To convince herself once more of Miss Farthingall's devotion to Louis would be to forestall the stirring of any possible doubts in the future. Therefore, it was to Stonefield that she was bound. She had not been there again since the day she had found the locket. Some curious feeling of distaste, which she had not attempted to examine closely, had kept her away from the schoolmistress. She was ready to give up her own happiness for the other's sake, but, oddly enough, she was not ready to enjoy her society, in the way she had enjoyed it before the discovery. To-day, however, all else was swept aside by the force of the impulse which had come over her. She felt that she must see Miss Farthingall, and see her immediately.

In as short a time as the distance allowed, the pony-carriage drew up before the Stonefield school-house. Traversing the empty class-room, Florence walked straight across the passage to the door she had entered twice before, and in her eagerness forgot to knock.

Miss Farthingall, who was kneeling on the floor

before an open trunk, glanced round in surprise. The next moment she had sprung to her feet—not forgetting, however, first to shut down the lid of the trunk—and stood opposite to her visitor, looking rather pale, but asking nothing.

"I have done it!" said Florence, without further greeting, as she sank down on the chair beside her.

Miss Farthingall grew a little paler, but at the same time something shot through her eyes, lighting them up brilliantly for an instant. She still asked nothing, but only stood looking and waiting.

"I have told Louis that I will never marry him, and he believes me at last; but this is all I can do. I have not been able to persuade him to pay you the debt he owes you. If he ever does so it will not be my merit; I feel as if it had all been a failure!" And, to her own great astonishment, she suddenly burst into excited tears.

Miss Farthingall was beside her in a moment—on her knees once more, and making pretty and discreet efforts at consolation.

"Oh, Miss Crossley, my dear Miss Crossley, what a thing to do!" she murmured, stroking the hands in which Florence's face was buried. "What on earth moved you to so desperate a step? Broken off your engagement! Oh, why did you not give me an idea of your intentions? I am sure I could have persuaded you out of it. Why, it is madness! Of course he will never marry me. I have long been resigned to my fate. If I could have guessed that the telling of my unhappy story would have so disastrous an effect, I would much rather have cut out my tongue than let a word escape me. Oh, can-

not matters yet be arranged? Perhaps it is not too late!"

"No, it can never be arranged," said Florence, rather jerkily, between heavy sobs. "I don't want it arranged; but I can't do more than I have done. All the rest——"

"You have done far too much already—far more than is reasonable or even right," protested Miss Farthingall, in a tone of tender reproach; while to herself, in quite another tone, she added, "The rest I fancy I can manage for myself."

"Tell me," said Florence, suddenly taking hold of Miss Farthingall's two hands with a grip that was almost painful—"tell me again that you really love him, in the way that I have loved him till now; that your heart is quite his—quite, *quite!*—that when he marries you—as I pray to God he will—you will make him happy and think only of him!"

She had drawn the schoolmistress towards her, and, bending forward herself, was gazing into her eyes with a fierce question in her own.

The vehemence of her manner was such that Miss Farthingall positively reddened; but she did not evade the glance, though neither did she answer immediately. In the minute of silence that followed, the blue eyes into which Florence gazed began gradually to kindle, while over the delicate features there slowly stole a shade of something that set the veins in her milk-white throat a throbbing, and caused the full red lips to open in a richer curve.

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully and slowly; "I love him, be sure of that—I love him as well as you do. When he merely touches my hand I am

happy; and, oh, that hour yesterday by his side!" She paused and heaved a slow, voluptuous sigh, not looking at Florence now, but gazing dreamily past her through the little window. This time there was no mistaking that she spoke the truth.

"Yes; she loves him, thank God!" said Florence to herself. This was the sort of thing she had needed to hear.

"There is no other man to be compared to him. Have you noticed"—and Miss Farthingall's eyes turned back to Florence's face—"have you noticed how perfectly his nostrils are moulded? So deep and so clean-cut—they might be of stone, and yet as sensitive as those of a horse!"

"Nostrils?" said Florence, a little bewildered. "I don't think I know what his nostrils are like exactly. I don't even know if he is what people call handsome, but I feel sure that the bottom of his nature is really noble, and therefore I still hope that he will do you justice."

"And the sweep of his shoulders," went on Miss Farthingall, having apparently not heard; "have you ever seen anything as magnificent as they are? It makes one's heart beat, merely to look at them. I love him for those shoulders alone!"

"I think I love him more for the straight look in his eyes, and for the suggestion of mental strength about him. He has such tremendous energy in him."

"And such a good neck!" completed the schoolmistress, enthusiastically.

Florence dropped into silence, vaguely aware that, despite their agreement on the chief point, they were somehow at cross purposes. It was not the first time

that Miss Farthingall had startled her, though she had never attempted to analyze the cause of the slight shocks which had been brought to her by such remarks, for instance, as those which, on the very first day of their acquaintance, the schoolmistress had made on the looks of the footman and groom.

She released the hands she held, and rose slowly to her feet. Now that she had learnt what she had wanted to learn, she had nothing more to do here.

The tears which had dried upon her cheeks were still glistening there in silver patches as she took the reins into her hands. It was with a rather wan little smile that she nodded good-bye to the schoolmistress; for to-day her strength was at an end.

"She *is* fond of him," said Miss Farthingall, as she turned back thoughtfully to the schoolroom. There was triumph in her eyes, but there was something almost like a qualm at her heart; the sight of too acute suffering had never been pleasant to her.

But the soft moment was not long in passing.

"Bah!" she said, making a movement as though to rid herself of some oppression, "she'll have lots of other chances, but the odds are that this will be my only one!"

CHAPTER XI.

FAMILY HISTORY.

Circumstances were almost as responsible as nature for having made Cordelia Farthingall exactly what she was. Her father, the cast-off black sheep of an ancient Irish family, had been a mixture of a soldier and an adventurer, who, having served in all sorts of armies and in all sorts of wars—among which rebellions (in which he was generally to be found on the wrong side) had played a prominent part—had wound up a tolerably wild career by marrying, in a fit of compassion, a third-rate actress, who for years had been one of his standing flames. The stage accident which lamed her was at the same time the stroke of luck which procured her a husband, for Captain Farthingall's heart was even softer, and his imagination quite as inflammable, as Irish hearts and imaginations are apt to be; and thus it came about that the half-crippled *blonde*, cut off from her profession, and not knowing which way to turn, had accomplished what this same *blonde* in health and standing upright on her two feet had not been able to attain.

This oddly assorted couple lived by no means unhappily. The ex-actress was a good-natured, *bornée*, cheerful creature, who, finding herself landed in

matrimony, made the best of it, as well as of the poverty to which they rapidly sank. Her past had been a pretty lively one, but gratitude made her not only faithful to her husband, but lenient towards his conjugal failings. She never managed quite to get over this over-powering feeling of gratitude towards the man who had made her a captain's wife, just as never to her dying day could she hear herself addressed as "Mrs. Farthingall" without flushing with pleasure. The captain himself had been so used to roughing it that domestic privations failed to endanger the household peace, being borne with the hardiness and recklessness of an old soldier, who, having been accustomed to live from one day to the other, had never entertained any anxiety for the morrow, for the simple reason that it was so very doubtful whether he would live to see it. The habit clung to him, making forethought an impossible thing; and what he had become by practice, his wife was by nature—imprudent, thoughtless, but always sanguine; and thus they lived from day to day, and from hand to mouth, unreflecting as two children, and almost as contented.

As long as the captain lived the existence of the family was more or less nomadic; both he and she were too restless and too much accustomed to change to let them stay long on one spot. But through it all London remained their lode-star. Various places, both English and Continental, were tried in turn—for the captain had buried his sword on his wedding-day—their tents were pitched over and over again, only to be pulled down once more and dragged back to London. In Cordelia's childish recollections many out-of-the way places figured and many exciting

scenes, such as disputes with German tradesmen and French washerwomen, nocturnal flights from hotels with the unpaid bill left behind; but the pictures of London by-streets were more numerous than all the others. It was in London, too, that, after Captain Farthingall's death, his widow remained stranded, and at last stuck fast. Having somehow managed to become fat on poverty, she was no longer quite as movable as formerly, and therefore resigned herself to sit still, and for the sake of eking out the wretched pension on which she and her one child were condemned to live, began to give histrionic lessons to pupils whom she received in slippers and a dressing-gown minus most of the buttons. It was these lessons which brought to the little Cordelia—who owed her very name to the stage reminiscences of her mother's—her first sniff of theatrical air. Very soon the desire to go on the stage had taken full possession of her, but upon this idea the actress-mother immediately put down her very substantial foot. She had promised the captain on his death-bed that this should not be—it had been the one point on which he had fixed his prospective gaze, warned, perhaps, by the past—and, despite her flightiness, the ex-actress was too honest and too grateful to her husband's memory to go against his will. But it was a sore trial, for any one could see that Corrie was simply a born actress.

She was a different person altogether from her mother, with far more brains and far greater powers of calculation. Her mother's flightiness she had indeed inherited, also her elasticity, and much of her good humour and buoyancy under misfortune, but not her honesty of mind and faithfulness. A charac-

ter like hers could not, in the long run, be content within the narrow limitations of its present life; being able to see further than her mother, she also wanted more. Her more exacting senses, which she probably owed to the admixture of aristocratic blood, were far more acutely attracted than Mrs. Farthingall's had ever been by the good things of this life. From her father she had got the undaunted spirit and physical energy which had characterized him, also the inflammable fancy, ready to flare up, but unable to burn for long, which, by leading him into innumerable scrapes, had estranged him from his family, and which, as she soon began to feel, would be a danger to herself. Her spirit of restlessness she had inherited from both parents, her keenness and coolness from neither—it was to herself alone that she owed them—qualities which had come from who knows where, and which circumstances had developed to singular perfection.

From her earliest childhood it had been clear to Cordelia that her only chance of making her fortune lay in the combination of her face and her wits. Soon she began to understand that even off the boards her talents need not be wasted, for the fact of the whole world being a stage was one which took early possession of her mind. The great question was how best to make use of them in order to attain her object—an object which she never really lost sight of, despite the various accidents, to the verge of which her excitable senses occasionally led her, for, under all her flightiness, there was in the girl an undercurrent of determination which few suspected—something of the iron hand beneath the velvet glove. Privations and discomforts she bore cheerfully, not because, like her

mother, she didn't mind them, but because she felt sure that they were not going to last for ever.

The combination of all these qualities had made of Cordelia Farthingall the ideal adventuress—the adventuress with a purpose—ready for anything, and knowing how to turn everything to her own ends. Even to those who had gauged her fully, her plucky bearing up under misfortune, as well as the extraordinary amount of what the Americans call "grit," hidden away under that fairy-like form, made her not wholly unlovable—a graceful, brilliant, fantastical being, who unavoidably attracted attention, and could scarcely escape stirring admiration, and, after all, not much worse than other people, since, if she harmed anybody, it was only because of being so very hard-up herself, for of malice there existed not a grain in her nature. "Live and let live" had always been her motto. Such at this time was Cordelia Farthingall.

Her meeting with Louis Hepburne had brought about the first crisis in her life. Not that he was the first man who had made an impression on her—for even before she was fifteen, scarcely a member of the other sex had passed her in the street without the precocious blue eyes having taken his measure, as it were—but that she had never before been thrown so constantly into one man's society. As soon as she found out that he was a younger son, with only a very moderate fortune of his own, she began seriously to weigh the *pros* and *cons* of encouraging him yet further than she had already done. It was the *cons* that had it on the whole. The consciousness that she had her whole youth before her fed her ambition. She thought she could do better for herself than that; but

the struggle was a hard one, for Mr. Hepburne's splendid *physique* had made a deep impression upon her fancy, and, as usual, her cool head was a little in danger of being overbalanced by her inflammable senses. It was chiefly for fear of doing something imprudent that, on receiving her discharge, she had grasped at the opportunity offered her for disappearing from the scene. *Now* would have been the moment for appealing to her admirer, and possibly gaining him for a husband; but the idea was rejected after due reflection, and the ticket to Australia taken.

She had not yet disembarked when the image of Mr. Hepburne had begun to fade beside that of a black-haired fellow-passenger, who possessed the first true almond-shaped eyes which she had never met with in the flesh, although she had often gloated over them on paper; and when, five years later, she had again stepped on to English ground, it had required the chance remark made by the dying Bella even to remind her of her former admirer's existence.

But that remark once made was enough to reshape her plans. It had not been home-sickness alone which had brought her back to England, but also the acquaintance of an elderly manufacturer, who had been starting a branch house in Melbourne, and who, besides being a fine man for his age, was evidently much more than comfortably off. But although it was in order to keep her eye upon him that she had embarked in the same vessel, he had yet managed to escape her. Then it was, while she was deliberating as to her next move, that the news of Sir Louis Hepburne's succession to fortune and title had given her thoughts a new turn. It actually seemed as though that half-forgot-

ten flirtation might yet turn out to be of use. He had certainly admired her in those days, and he was still free. To her sanguine spirit this was enough encouragement, at least, to try her chance.

Arrived on the scene of action, there was the unpleasant discovery of the engagement to be faced; but even then she would not despair, until she had seen the woman she had to deal with; and once having seen her, her hopes unavoidably rose anew, for the power of reading character at a glance had been one of the advantages acquired from years of struggle. Her wits, sharpened on the whetstone of hardship, showed her the way to set about this enterprise. Out of the reminiscences attached to a few strolls in the twilight, a few glances exchanged, a couple of pressures of the hand—backed by the trump-card of her dismissal—it was astonishing how pretty a romance could be woven by skilful hands, how heartrending a picture of portrayed innocence. How conveniently, for instance, that locket had come in, into which in a moment of rapture five years ago she had stuffed that photograph of Louis, stolen from his very room. It was not even necessary to invent, only to colour and to group—always a much safer thing to do, and one which she understood to perfection. Thus her references to her mother were in themselves a work of art. All that the defunct Mrs. Farthingall had had to do with the past episode had been—in answer to a glowingly worded description of the visitor staying in the house—to write her daughter a tolerably well-spelled sermon on good behaviour in general and the danger of encouraging young men in particular. In terms that were emphatic, if not strictly grammatical—for

the ex-actress was terribly vain of her tardily acquired respectability, and naturally took her daughter to be as giddy as she herself had been—Cordelia was implored to remember that she was a captain's daughter, and that nothing must be allowed to tarnish the name of Farthingall. Out of this passage the daughter had, at the given time, evolved that picture of a broken-hearted mother, which had helped so effectually to harrow Florence's feelings, as well as the estrangement from further relatives, of whose existence she was indeed vaguely aware, but whom she had never actually seen.

And yet, despite the depths of falsehood within her, she had spoken the truth to-day, at least when she told Florence Crossley that she loved Sir Louis. The enterprise had been begun purely out of calculation, but, meeting him again, her former fancy had flared up in a far more passionate form. It was not only that he had grown richer, but also better looking; in every way he was more desirable now than he had then been. Big men had always had an attraction for this small woman—for we generally go by contrasts—and Sir Louis was almost a giant compared to her, while these five years had developed his magnificent frame, and stamped his features with a strength and manliness which could not escape any one with so keen an eye to the physical points of men as Miss Farthingall possessed. The species of ecstasy into which she had seemed to fall while dwelling on his perfections had not been feigned, but very real indeed; from the moment of having seen him again—indeed, almost from the moment of having espied his latest photograph on Florence's mantelpiece—she had

felt that she must gain him at any price. At the close of the school-feast yesterday, and under the influence of his near vicinity, she would almost have been ready to marry him without a fortune, though the fact of his possessing one undoubtedly bore the chief merit in fixing her determination.

One half of the work was done already, but—as Florence had said—the other half still remained to be done, and the question now was how best to set about it.

"Patience!" was what she said to herself, with a burningly impatient sigh, as the result of the reflections that followed upon Florence's visit. "There must be no hurry; the first thing is to give him time."

CHAPTER XII.

LADY HEPBURNE.

On leaving the Long Walk, after his final parting with Florence, Sir Louis went home like a man dazed, and scarcely yet fully realizing what had happened. He was passing down the stone-paved passage which ran the length of the castle, when the sound of his name, pronounced in a thin, plaintively quavering voice, caused him to stand still suddenly. In one moment the rage in his heart, which had been silently consuming him for an hour past, gave way to another emotion; to his hard-set features there came a look of keen pain. It was his mother who was calling him. He had not thought of this yet, and, remembering all that was at stake, he did not know how to face what was coming.

For a few moments he stood still listening. Perhaps, if he went softly past the door, she might not hear him; she might fancy that she had been mistaken in his step, and he would gain a little time for collecting his thoughts.

He was on the point of stealing forwards on tiptoe, when the voice came again.

"Louis," it said, with even more pathetic plaintiveness than the first time, "Louis, why do you not come to me?"

There was no saying "No" to that voice.

For one moment longer he hesitated, with his hand on the door handle, then, with a deep, quick sigh, entered the room.

The Stonefield drawing-room, occupying the whole breadth of one of the castle wings, was lighted only at each end by a broad oriel window, scarcely sufficing to dispel the gloom which gathered for ever in the centre of the long, low-ceilinged apartment, more a gallery than a room in its proportions, as well as in the bareness which as yet reigned in the long-disused space. In the heart of this gloom—gratefully cool on a hot summer's day, but drearily depressing on a winter afternoon, or even such an overcast July evening as was this—and beside the empty fireplace, there sat in a deep chair an alarmingly thin, white-haired old lady, with a bleached mouth that from time to time twitched nervously, and a look of feverish eagerness in her mild brown eyes. There was neither book nor work lying anywhere within her reach, and her long-fingered, emaciated hands lay idle in her lap, occupied only in now and then crumpling into a ball the delicate handkerchief they held, and then again carefully smoothing it out.

As Sir Louis entered, she sat more upright in her chair, and looked eagerly, not at him, but beyond him, as though expecting some second person to follow.

"Have you not brought her yet?" she anxiously inquired. "I thought for certain that you would bring her to-day."

"No; I have not brought her," said Sir Louis; and, reaching his mother's side, he knelt down on the floor and hid his face against her arm. It was

the only way he could prevent her reading in his eyes.

"But why not?" she asked in naïve disappointment.

"She could not come," he desperately answered.

"Why could she not come? Why do you not bring me Flo? I want to see Flo!" the thin voice went on, with the persistency of a child, while the nervous hands crumpled up the morsel of cambric again, and again began to smooth out the creases. "It is a week now since we came back, and I have been expecting her every day."

"Yes, yes, I know; but I told you that she had been prevented. To-day it was impossible."

"But will she come another day?"

"Yes, she will come another day."

He said it steadily, though with an immense pang at his heart. No lies could matter so long as this pathetic disappointment was lightened.

She put one of her skeleton hands under his chin, and, dragging up his face to a level with hers, looked with her feverish and yet strangely blank eyes deep into his troubled ones. Now was the time for gathering all his strength together; but so great was his fear of the consequences of a self-betrayal that he even succeeded in smiling.

"When will it be?" she asked softly, almost coaxingly.

"Soon, very soon; perhaps next week."

"Next week!" And she heaved a patient sigh, a sigh of gentle but not the less suffering resignation. The sound of it cut him once more to the heart. He knew that particular sigh so well; he had heard it so

often! How much oftener would he have to hear it? He scarcely dared put to himself the question, when at length he had gained the solitude of his room.

Lady Hepburne had never recovered from the death of her eldest son, who had himself begun by being a second son, the original eldest son having succumbed to scarlet fever as a boy of ten. Already the first loss had shaken her sensitive nature considerably; while her husband's death, cutting him off on the threshold of what promised to be a hale and hearty old age, had come almost as unexpectedly, and so far undermined her powers of resistance, that Philip's tragic death in the hunting-field had proved the last blow, before which she went down. On her recovery from the stroke of paralysis, which had seized her at the news, it soon became evident that her intellect, and to some extent also her memory, had irretrievably suffered. Gradually a species of mania developed itself. She was of Hepburne blood herself, having been her husband's first cousin, and all her life had been far prouder of her name than had even been Sir Charles himself. It was this feeling of family pride which now exclusively coloured her thoughts. From the moment of her recovery, she seemed possessed by the one idea that the name of Hepburne was doomed to extinction, and consumed by the desire to avert the threatened fate. Of the five children which Providence had given her, only three remained, and among these the two daughters had never counted in her eyes for quite as much as the sons; while dating from the moment of the mental change, they simply lost all importance. Louis was the only one who could still save the family from ex-

tinction; and therefore to see him safely married had become the one object in her failing life, the one desire on which all her poor weakening thoughts were bent. Most other things—memories, interests, even affections—had sunk into darkness, but this one point burnt brightly for ever before her eyes. Life had lost for her everything except the hope of yet being able to lay her withered hand on the head of Louis's son. The news of his having chosen a wife was the only tidings of joy for which she looked. Since his return from India, a year ago, there had not passed a day on which she had lain down at night without looking to the morrow as possibly bringing the fulfilment of her hope, nor a morning on which she had not awakened with the thought, "Perhaps it will be to-day!"

It had reached this point that Sir Louis could not come home even from an hour's walk without her anxious brown eyes looking at him inquiringly, as though half hoping that he had picked up a bride during his constitutional, and he had long got used to the wistful question put regularly at the moment of saying good night, "Nothing yet?"

To have to answer "Nothing!" had become a sort of slow torture, which grew with each saying of the word, and the gently patient sigh which regularly followed, had been the hardest of all to bear. She had always been a mild woman, and this characteristic of mildness still pervaded her darkened spirit. It had been a happy day for both mother and son when at last the joyful answer had been spoken: "Yes, there is something now!"

The rapture on the emaciated features, the melt-

ing of preoccupation in the brown eyes into joyful surprise would be a good thing to remember to his very life's end. There were no questions asked, no explanations even wanted; who or what the bride elected was had no interest for her—lay, in fact, beyond the grasp of her weakened powers. Louis was going to marry somebody called Flo—he was going to marry her soon—that was enough.

And now, with one word, he was to destroy the blissful dream, to extinguish all the sunshine which had flooded the evening of this sorely tried life. To tell her to her face that not only was he not going to marry now, but would probably remain single all his life, seeing that his trust in women was irretrievably shaken. The thing lay beyond his strength, he could not do it. How to avoid doing it he did not clearly see, but by every means in his power he would keep the truth from her so long as it could be kept. The announcement that his engagement was broken would probably be her death-sentetnce; he knew it, and decided that at no price must it be pronounced. There was nothing for it but soothing evasions, patched up explanations, to be dragged on from week to week, in the vague hope of something happening to prevent the terrible disclosure—perhaps death being merciful enough to step in before she discovered the truth—and then to listen once more to that patient sigh, whose sound had become almost intolerable. He had hoped that he was done with that dreadful sigh for ever, but he knew better now.

The weeks that followed on the final interview in the Long Walk were to Sir Louis a period of men-

tal stagnation, during which he kept as carefully out of the way of the woman whom he had wanted to marry as of that of the woman who wanted to marry him. He was, in fact, sulking with both girls, angry with both—the one for loving him, or pretending to do so, and the other for not loving him. It was a relief when, before the end of July, Mr. Crossley took his daughter abroad, obviously in order to avoid the unpleasant sensation caused by the breaking off of her engagement. There was now only one person to avoid, and several more weeks passed before Sir Louis discovered that the assiduity which he applied to this object was somewhat of a superfluous effort, seeing that the little schoolmistress seemed at least as anxious to escape a meeting as he himself could possibly be. In fact, her avoidance of him was so pointed that there seemed some danger of notice being attracted by it. He had caught glimpses of her from a distance in the village street, obviously coming straight in his direction, and then, at sight of him, turning abruptly aside and taking another road. At times, even, he had seen her hiding in some doorway, or behind some haystack, until he should be safely passed; and on the few occasions when she had not been able to escape, she had hurried past him with a haste that was almost ill-mannered, as though afraid of being accosted. What could the foolish girl mean by so absurd a caution? Did she flatter herself that he had even an eye for her? Could she possibly be afraid of any renewal of that dallying, five years ago, by which she declared her reputation to have been damaged? At this point of his reflections a recollection of certain moments at the school-feast was apt to bring to Sir Louis a passing

qualm of conscience, and probably it was this qualm that helped to increase the irritation which—since he became fully awake to it—Miss Farthingall's conduct caused him. Why, this was the very way to get herself talked about, and him too, and—reckless though his mind was at this time—he had no desire to see his name coupled with hers. So strained a position could clearly not be kept up. He would put an end to it by telling her his opinion as plainly as was allowable under the circumstances, and showing her that he at least had no reason for shunning a chance meeting with an indifferent acquaintance.

It was for this purpose that, on the very next occasion that presented itself, Sir Louis straightway accosted the astonished schoolmistress.

The meeting took place in one of the steep, stony lanes that connected the village with the hills, running at the bottom of a winding gulley, as rough almost as the empty bed of a torrent, and lying deep between loose walls of stone, over whose grey faces the reddening bramble branches straggled brilliantly. He was on his way back from the hills, and espied her from a distance, just as she turned slowly into the lane, evidently in search of a breath of air after school hours; but she, apparently, had not seen him until she was already far engaged on the path from which there was no escape except by turning back. At sight of the approaching figure it almost seemed as though she had thought of flight, for she stopped short, and looked backwards irresolutely, and then forwards again. Apparently she began to realize that she was caught as in a trap. He thought he could see her measuring with her eye the distance to the one

opening in the wall which might have given her an opportunity for disappearing among the bushes. A fresh wave of irritation came over him; this was simply childish. He strode forward angrily, bent on intercepting her; for she had quickened her pace, evidently determined to make for the gap. His long legs, as well as the advantage given him by the steep incline, won the race, with the result that when she reached the only hole that led out of the trap, she found it blocked by his broad figure.

She stood still for one moment, breathless from the quick walk uphill, and then, with a swift, reproachful glance, would have passed on again, but he put out his hand.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Farthingall," he said in that sort of tone which takes no denial, "but would you kindly tell me what makes you run away from me?"

She stood before him, still breathing rather fast, and hanging her head, but she did not immediately attempt a reply.

"If any one had happened to witness your manœuvre of a minute ago," went on Sir Louis, mercilessly, "what do you suppose they would have imagined?"

"That I wished to get out of your way," murmured the schoolmistress, confusedly.

"And that I had done you some injury, or wished to do you some injury else it were not possible that you should run from me like a mouse from a cat. Has it never occurred to you that to shun me so openly is exactly the way to set people talking?"

"Oh, I hope not!" said Miss Farthingall, quickly. "I don't want to be talked about—again."

Sir Louis bit his lip. "So far as *I* am concerned," he remarked, with a somewhat grim emphasis, "there is no earthly reason why you should be, just as there never was any reason for your having been talked about—you know that as well as I do, even though it may have amused some old women to make fairy tales out of a couple of walks which we took together once upon a time, and a couple of roses which I cut for you in the garden—everyday episodes, which meant nothing either to you or to me."

He laughed rather loudly, bent upon giving a lighter turn to the conversation.

Again Miss Farthingall said nothing. He watched her lowered face with angry curiosity. Her silence irritated him beyond measure; it seemed to say so plainly, "To you, yes, but not to me!"

Decidedly it was best to clear up matters once for all, even at the risk of being a little brutal.

"If you suppose you have any reason for reproaching me with what was at most a very pardonable imprudence of conduct at the time I first met you in my cousin's house," he began with some of the haughtiness of the aristocrat, who, despite his theoretical breadth of ideas, never really loses sight in practice of the differences of social position.

"Reproach you! Oh, Sir Louis!" And the blue eyes looked into his face for one moment, and then down again to the dust at his feet. There was so deep a humility both in the voice and the glance that Sir Louis coloured with vexation at himself, ashamed of the tone he had just used. "I should never

dream of reproaching you, whatever had been, and whatever I had suffered; but as it is, of course you are not to blame, it was all my own fault, my own folly; I never should have allowed myself——" She broke off, and then added hurriedly, "But surely you will understand that my good name is to me all the fortune I have, and I have no choice but to guard it carefully?"

"No doubt; but in my opinion you are setting the wrong way about it. There is no earthly reason, for instance, why you should hide in a doorway when I am coming down the street. You must give up that sort of nonsense, Miss Farthingall."

"I dare say you are right, and perhaps I have been over-cautious, but——"

She hesitated, stirring a prematurely fallen leaf with the point of her slender foot.

"But what?" he impatiently asked.

"It was not my good name alone that I was thinking of; there was another reason as well. I—I could not help fancying that after—after all that has happened, the sight of me might be unpleasant to you."

"What do you mean?" he asked, with a return of the haughty tone.

"About your engagement," she faltered, almost inaudibly. "Nobody guesses how it came to be broken off, but I know, alas! that I myself was the innocent cause of that—that misfortune. My one consolation," she added, more hurriedly, "lies in the thought that perhaps, after all, it was a mercy in disguise; but of course *you* cannot look at it in that way, and of course I know that to see me must be to remind you of what you have lost. It is only natural

that you should hate me; but, oh, it is hard to bear!"

The last words seemed to have been spoken against her will, and this time when she looked up there were tears, real genuine tears, dimming the blueness of her eyes. This time, too, they did not drop again so quickly, but hung on his face, slowly dilating, as though they could not again unfasten themselves, while from between her parted lips her breath came quicker and always quicker.

Sir Louis looked at her, taken aback by the passion that rung in her tone, and betrayed itself in the dilating eyes and heaving breast. However inconvenient and unwonted was this devotion, it was impossible not to be moved by the sight, just as it was impossible not to feel mollified by the discovery that the explanation of her strange behaviour lay as much in consideration for his feelings as for hers.

"There is no question of hating," he said, with a sort of gruff kindness of tone. "What has been has been, and you are not responsible for it. All I want to say is that, if you want to avoid gossip, you had better give up your exaggerated caution for the future; it is quite superfluous, seeing that no one knows of our former acquaintance. Therefore I want you to promise that you will not run out of my path whenever you happen to cross it."

"I will do as you bid me," said Miss Farthingall, submissively.

And the next minute they were each going their several ways, and each with a head full of new thoughts.

"It is true that no one knows of our former ac-

quaintance," Miss Farthingall was saying to herself thoughtfully as she slowly climbed the path, "but that is no reason why they should not find out."

Sir Louis, on his side, as he descended towards the village, could not get rid of the surprise he had felt when the schoolmistress had given him that look, and of the recollection of the flame which had sprung to her eyes, drying up the tears in one moment. In the days of their earlier acquaintance he had never even deemed her capable of such emotions. Either she must have changed very much since that time, or else he had mistaken her all along.

At home there were again his mother's eyes to encounter, with the standing question in them.

"She has had to go away with her father," he patiently explained. "She is not quite well, but she will soon come back again, and then we shall be married."

The ingeniously varied lies came quite glibly by this time, but for how much longer would they be able to go on?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TIGER-LILY.

From this time on Miss Farthingall no longer hid in doorways nor slipped behind haystacks when she saw Sir Louis coming down the street. It was the natural result of the conversation last recorded, and exactly as it should be. Indeed, once she had renounced those exaggerated precautions, Sir Louis had nothing further to complain of in the schoolmistress. On the several occasions when the interests of the school or the obligations of near neighbourhood brought about some unavoidable meeting, he even found himself forced to acknowledge the admirable tact which made it possible, even though he believed now that he was loved—how could he doubt it after that moment of undisguised emotion in the lane?—to meet and talk like mere acquaintances. It was evident that she had put a strong guard upon herself, for her bearing had become the very perfection of discretion, with only rare moments of half betrayal, and as many swift, seemingly unwilling glances as were wanted to keep alive in him the consciousness that here lay a heart at his disposal. Miss Farthingall had a wonderful knack for hitting off the middle in everything. A little more display would have fright-

ened him off, a little less might have left him too cool; but the measure being perfect, it was only natural that he should feel vaguely touched by this humble devotion, and all the more so for its being so evident that it expected no return. Occasionally after one of those moments of self-betrayal which showed him, as though by the drawing away of a veil, to what extent he was loved, his thoughts would turn uneasily backwards, and he would put himself through a species of examination of conscience with regard to those fatal three weeks spent with the Macallans. *Had* he really been so imprudent as the result seemed to imply? Did the havoc done to Miss Farthingall's feelings, as well as to her reputation, actually lie at his door? At the first hearing his sober common sense had laughed the idea to scorn, but under the influence of constant meetings with her—of which he could not be aware that they were not always due entirely to chance—it was unavoidable that he should reconsider the question. He certainly was under the impression that he had not gone beyond the limits of fair play, but that had been five years ago. He was younger then, more hot-headed, no doubt also more foolish; at this distance of time it was difficult to gauge the exact nature of a glance or a pressure of the hand, or whatever it was that had done the harm. The more he looked back, the more he began to distrust his memory, and the more uneasily his conscience stirred. It seemed scarcely credible that she should have loved him so long and so faithfully if he had not given her some ground for the belief that she was loved again. Oh, if another woman had been able to love in this fashion! How different would his life be now! It

was thus that his reflections generally ended, with the sigh, half pain, half resentment, which escaped him whenever he thought of his recreant and—in his eyes—fickle bride.

But even while condemning her, he could not quite repress a certain curiosity with regard to the exact state of her feelings at the moment of the rupture. Had she actually believed in his guilt, or had she feigned this belief for the sake of masking her own unstableness? Was it jealousy which had extinguished love, or had there never been any love to extinguish? He would have given a good deal to know. The only person who would be likely to know was Miss Farthingall, her short acquaintance with whom seemed to have been full of mutual confidences. He began to consider the feasibility of indirectly approaching the question, and more than one of his accostings of Miss Farthingall were due to his intention of making the attempt, but had ended without his having found courage to do so. Twice, regardless of the notice he might thereby be attracting, he had accompanied her to the door of the schoolhouse. On the occasion of the fourth or fifth meeting, however, curiosity triumphed over the dread which held him back.

"By-the-by," he began abruptly, quite forgetting that he had meant to lead up to the subject, "you said something the other day which I should like explained."

"Yes?" said Miss Farthingall, inquiringly, and perhaps a trifle startled.

"Yes—that time we met in the lane. You were speaking of the breaking-off of my engagement, and

you made some remark about its perhaps having been a mercy in disguise. What did you exactly mean by that?"

"Oh," said the schoolmistress, trying not to look relieved, "that was only something that passed through my mind—it only escaped me. You really must not ask me to explain."

"But I do ask you. You shouldn't have let it escape you if you didn't mean to speak out."

"Well, you see," she reluctantly began, "I have rather—romantic ideas about marriage, and one of my notions is that the love on both sides should be equal."

"I see. And you have reason to suppose that in this case it was not equal?"

"I never said——"

"Of course not, because you cannot violate Miss Crossley's confidence; but I know quite enough already. You are telling me no secrets when you tell me that my reign in that quarter was short."

He spoke with darkening eyes and a scornful ring in his deep voice.

Miss Farthingall glanced up at him, and walked on a few paces in silence.

"You must not be hard on her," she said thoughtfully. "It is not her fault if her faith in you stumbled over the first obstacle that came in the way. Some women require more devotion than they give—it is their nature; every one cannot love in the same way."

It was said quite naturally, in an almost matter-of-fact tone.

"You seem to know more about it than I do," said Sir Louis, looking at her with one of those move-

ments of distrust, which still occasionally came over him, and were a remnant of the original low estimation in which he had held this woman.

Instead of replying to his remark, she stopped short.

"I think we had better say good-bye here. I see the Tiger-Lily—I beg your pardon, Miss Ward—coming out of the grocer's shop. She always buys her tea here, because it's better than at Heywood, she says. I don't want to be over-cautious, since you've forbidden me that, but she would certainly not approve of your walking with me—and you know how she talks!" And with a smile, half mischievous, half pathetic, the little schoolmistress darted nimbly from his side and across the street.

There passed another week or two, and presently, to his great annoyance, various remarks dropped by various people told Sir Louis that the secret of his former acquaintance with Miss Farthingall, and even the fact of her dismissal on his account, was known in the neighbourhood. How it came to be known he could not imagine. Florence would certainly be too proud to speak of what she knew; and it stood to reason, or seemed to him to stand to reason, that the only other person acquainted with the facts of the case, viz., Miss Farthingall herself, would not be the one to spread the report—only another proof of how little he knew the woman he had to deal with.

It had been on the very day of the talk about the broken engagement that Miss Ward, shortly after her exit from the grocer's shop, had come into possession of the facts.

Miss Farthingall had barely had time to take off

her hat, when the doctor's spinster sister entered the school-house close on her heels, and obviously in one of her most aggressive humours. Beyond her self-constituted mission for controlling the morals of the neighbourhood, the Tiger-Lily had private reasons for keeping an especially sharp look-out on the school-mistress, and the sight she had just enjoyed on leaving the grocer's shop was as fuel to the fire of her indignation.

At sight of her visitor, Miss Farthingall broke into a beaming smile. She knew now for certain that she had been seen with Sir Louis.

"I wonder what made you run away from me just now," began Miss Ward, having first in funereal silence, sat down on the chair offered. "It almost looked as though you were afraid of me."

"I was in a hurry."

"You didn't look in much of a hurry while you were talking to Sir Louis. Was it school business you were discussing, by-the-by?"

"No; as it happens it was not school business."

"Humph! I should have thought it was the most natural thing to talk about to a schoolmistress who is also a stranger."

Miss Farthingall paused for one moment before speaking, and rapidly reviewed the situation. She saw that this was her opportunity for carrying out an idea which, ever since that first meeting in the lane, had floated before her mind's eye, but whose realization had, until now, appeared premature. What she meant to do was apparently a great imprudence, and even now she was aware that a certain risk attached to it; but the truth was that, despite her cool head, her

hot heart was beginning to grow impatient, and pushed her to do something which might precipitate the action. If ever she meant to carry out the idea this was the right moment, as the Tiger-Lily was undoubtedly the right person. To this thought she succumbed.

"Not quite a stranger," she murmured, after that pause.

Miss Ward's sunken eyes opened a little.

"Not a stranger? Why, I thought you met him for the first time at the school-feast?"

"Not for the first time. I thought he had perhaps mentioned to you that I had had a situation with his cousins, the Macallans, and that he had been on a visit there during the time."

"No, he never mentioned anything," said Miss Ward, sitting more upright on her chair, while her arid cheek actually began to show some signs of circulating blood. This was beginning to be interesting. "And you made his acquaintance there?"

"Unluckily I did," said Miss Farthingall, and then broke off short. With the same breath she began to talk of something else. This was enough. She knew that, once put upon the scent, the Tiger-Lily would find out the rest for herself, and, of course, she did. To such an expert as she was, the Macallans name was clue enough; within a week she knew all about the flirtation, the dismissal, and the banishment to Australia, and, knowing it, she hugged herself for joy. Why, this was exactly what she wanted! If these disclosures were not enough to open the eyes of her poor, infatuated brother, then his case was desperate indeed.

CHAPTER XIV.

"YE BANKS AND BRAES."

It was about this time that those annoying reports began to circulate in the neighbourhood. They would have provoked Sir Louis even mor than they did had they not been accompanied by another and much more opportune piece of news; for it had come to his ears that Dr. Ward himself, the staid, middle-aged, and apparently incurably bachelor doctor, had fallen a victim to the blue eyes of the schoolmistress, and, despite the desperate resistance of his sister, was showing signs of coming forward as a suitor for her hand. From the moment of learning this, Sir Louis breathed more freely. Miss Farthingall's marriage would be the removal of many difficulties, and the final smoothing away of all those qualms of conscience which had lately been slowly but unavoidably awakening. And, despite his knowledge of her devotion to himself, he could scarcely doubt that, if only the doctor dared to brave his sister, the marriage would actually come off; for this devotion acknowledged itself to be hopeless, and the doctor was a well-to-do man, not yet past the prime of life, altogether a prize such as rarely falls to the share of a village schoolmistress.

But this new feeling of satisfaction was short-

lived. It was from the lips of his younger sister (who, after spending the season in London under the wing of Mrs. Ripon, the former Miss Hepburne, joined him about this time), that Sir Louis heard the news which not only destroyed it in one moment, but set his conscience stirring far more uneasily than before.

Edith Hepburne was a large, mild, fair-haired person, pretty enough in a limp and wholly unexciting sort of way. She had her mother's mild, brown eyes, but the gentleness of Lady Hepburne's disposition had, in her daughter, degenerated into a humility so ostentatious as to be almost irritating, more especially as there seemed to exist no plausible reason for it. Despite every advantage of position and education, this distinctly good-looking girl seemed to sink quite naturally to the last place, wherever she showed herself, and, once there, lacked either the energy or the inclination to move upwards. It had been in accordance with her brother's wishes that she had, on her arrival, taken charge of a Sunday class. She had no aptitude whatever for the task, being one of those people who seem born to obey rather than to be obeyed; but the idea of disputing Louis's will—or, indeed, the will of any one who came near her—never so much as occurred to her.

It was after one of these Sunday ordeals that, reaching home rather later than usual, she began thankfully to pour out the cold tea, which could in a moment have been replaced by a fresh beverage had she possessed self-assertion enough to ring the bell and give the order.

"You are late," said Sir Louis, in a low tone, for

his mother was slumbering in her chair at the other side of the room.

"Yes; I was talking with Miss Farthingall. I hope you did not want anything?" she added apologetically.

"Not I! but I fancied you had gone for a walk, and half wished I had joined you."

"No; it was Miss Farthingall. We were making out a list of the books we need."

Edith began slowly pulling the gloves off her full, white hands, but it was only after she had been staring thoughtfully into her tea-cup for some moments that she added, still in the subdued tone in which they were talking, "I wonder if she has acted wisely?"

"In what way?"

"In refusing Dr. Ward. He seems such a good man."

"Nonsense!" said Sir Louis, more startled than he wanted to betray. "She can't have refused him. I don't believe he has even proposed yet."

"Yes he has," answered Edith, with the deprecating air she always wore when forced to utter a contradiction of any sort. "She told me so herself. It was only yesterday, and she refused him."

"But you told me that you had been making out a book-list."

"Yes; but we soon got done, and somehow the talk turned to other things, and then the doctor was mentioned, and she let out the secret, thinking that I had heard it already."

"What can have possessed her?" said Sir Louis, pulling angrily at his moustache.

Edith sighed sympathetically, for her heart was as soft as her yielding white flesh.

"Well, of course she didn't tell me that; but from some remarks she made it is evident that she cares for somebody else so much that she can't make up her mind to any other marriage."

"And didn't you give her your opinion on the matter?" asked Sir Louis, almost glaring at his sister. "Didn't you try to show her the folly of it?"

"I! Oh, Louis, how could I? What right have I to advise?"

He smiled bitterly as he contemplated her. No, she was not the sort of person to give an adverse opinion, even if she happened to have one.

That evening he took a walk in the hills—his usual recipe for working off a fit of ill humour, of which he felt a sharp attack to-day. The "Farthingall difficulty," which had seemed on the point of being cleared away, had returned upon him in full force. Not that, even were she safely married, could his thoughts ever again turn towards Florence, who had renounced him of her own free will, having recognized her affection for him as insufficient. Never again would he sue for her favour; but to see Miss Farthingall provided for would, nevertheless, be an extraordinary satisfaction—the only way he could see for putting finally to rest the scruples which had been weighing on him half the summer, and which the report now pervading the neighbourhood had awakened into greater activity. Despite what Florence used to call his "matter-of-factness," he was beginning to feel worried and puzzled. To find his name once more thus unaccountably coupled with that of

Miss Farthingall, irritated him, of course, but also perplexed him. Go out of her way as much as he liked, he could not escape the feeling that he was somehow entangled in obligations, about whose origin he did not feel quite clear in his mind. Since every one appeared so unanimous on the point of his guilt, was it not possible that the majority was right, and that he was wrong? And the worst of it was that he could make no reproach to the cause of all this inconvenience; for Miss Farthingall, to judge from a fresh access of reserve, was as much put out by it as he himself.

A chance circumstance had helped to heighten his ill humour that same evening on which he had learnt the news of the doctor's rejection. He was on his way back to the castle in the dusk when, from somewhere close by, a soft, low voice was heard crooning a familiar melody, one which he had often heard in the north when staying with his cousins—

"Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,
Frae off its thorny tree;
And my fause lover staw the rose,
But left the thorn wi' me!"

The sound came from somewhere close at hand, and, looking about him, he perceived that he had inadvertently taken the road which ran past the back of the school-house, and that the plaintively uttered words which reached his ear came from the open window of the schoolmistress's room.

With an oath upon his lips he quickened his pace, but for the rest of that evening he kept the burden of "Ye Banks and Braes" in his head, and, do what

he would, he could not help recalling a certain evening in Scotland five years ago, during which he had assisted his little cousins' governess in gathering roses for the table, and taken so much time over it as to earn for Miss Farthingall a severe reprimand. He remembered, too, that she had pricked her finger badly in the process, and that he had bound it up for her with her handkerchief. Trivial circumstances, all these had hitherto appeared to him, but, looked back upon in the light of recent events, they were beginning to grow unpleasantly important.

"And my fause lover staw the rose,
But left the thorn wi' me."

Was he really the false lover of the song, the cruel leaver-behind of the thorn, whose fickleness had been immortalized in one of the most pathetic melodies ever written? And could really no one but he extract that painful thorn which had, to all appearances, stabbed to the heart an innocent young life?

After all, why not? The idea came to him without preparation, and he laughed a reckless laugh, as he put the wild, sullen question to himself. He had nothing else to hope for, and would it not be a fine way of showing his faithless bride that he could live without her, as she without him? There seemed to be something grimly humorous in the notion of taking her at her word.

For a minute or two he played with the idea, then let it drop again. He had not taken it seriously, even for one moment, knowing that he could not do the thing.

Meanwhile, as time dragged on into late autumn,

the task of blinding his mother became more and more difficult. Some sort of suspicion was evidently stirring in her, for she began to look at him again with the old, anxious question in her eyes. The fluctuations in her mental state made it at all times a difficult task to deal with her; to moments of unexpected clearness there would follow periods during which she no longer knew *why* she wanted this thing, *why* it was that Louis was to be married, though never for a moment did she lose her hold upon the idea that he *must* get married. Occasionally she would look at him with a dawning intelligence in her eyes, so real that he trembled in the knowledge of his secret, and then, before a question was spoken, the cloud would return, the mists would gather again, as they do over a spot on the hills in autumn, gathering and dispersing and shifting a little, and gathering again, but never entirely disappearing.

But despite the merciful mist, Sir Louis felt daily more plainly that the truth would soon have to be told, and at the mere thought he quaked like a child in fear of punishment.

Matters were in this state when, on a singularly mild afternoon towards the end of October, Sir Louis, coming out of the Stonefield gates, caught sight of Miss Farthingall rapidly mounting the hill towards the castle. The village lay close below, on the mediæval plan of feeling safe only under the very castle walls, but the schoolmistress had never approached the house so near before, and had shown singular tact in this, Sir Louis had thought; it was all the more astonishing to see her here to-day. She looked as though she had urgent business in hand, and,

although he had been on the point of starting in the opposite direction, he stood still and waited for her approach.

"Nothing wrong at the school, I hope?" he inquired as she reached him.

"Well, yes, rather; that is why I came. One of the children was taken ill this forenoon, and I think myself it's scarlet fever, but as Dr. Bridges is away in London, I haven't had an opinion yet, and I came to ask you if you could kindly send a carriage for Dr. Ward, for if it *is* scarlet fever of course we'll have to close the school."

"Of course. This is rather serious. Stand back, Miss Farthingall, or you'll be run over!"

The heavy iron gates which opened from the stone-paved courtyard straight on to the road had just swung open, and Lady Hepburne, with her daughter by her side, appeared, seated in the roomy, luxurious landau, which had been built expressly for her use, and in which she regularly took the air, whenever the weather permitted. Seen thus reclining among her cushions, and muffled in costly wraps, she was a stately figure still, and only the strange emptiness in the widely opened eyes betrayed that all was not as it had always been. As the large vehicle slowly passed between the gates, the brown eyes passed uneasily from side to side, as though in search of something. Suddenly they fell upon Louis and his companion, remained fixed for one moment, and then began to kindle; the large, thin mouth twitched nervously.

"Stop!" she almost shrieked to the coachman, as she straightened herself on her seat; and then,

bending over the side of the carriage, stretched her two hands to the astonished schoolmistress.

"At last! You have come at last!" she uttered in shaking accents. "I have been waiting for you so long."

Miss Farthingall looked at Louis in perplexity.

"But, mother," he began. But she would not listen.

"Yes, yes, I know; you were bringing her to me. Yes, I understand. I will turn back at once. I will not drive to-day. Oh, Flo, my dearest Flo, how I have waited for you! It was time you came! Oh, I believe the joy will kill me!"

With the last words she sank back on the seat, her mouth twitching ever faster, while a leaden pallor began to spread over her features.

"It won't do to contradict her," said Sir Louis, in a quick undertone.

"I understand," whispered back Miss Farthingall; having already grasped the situation. "It can't really matter who she takes me for."

"You should have come sooner! Why did you not come sooner?" Lady Hepburne was murmuring faintly, while the colour ebbed from her cheek.

"She could not come sooner, mother; it was impossible. Mother!" he cried again, in a louder and more startled tone, stepping close up to the carriage; but she had already lost consciousness.

He had not seen the first paralytic stroke, but the terror within him made him guess what this was.

"Can you ever forgive me?" asked Miss Farthingall an hour later. She was standing with Sir

Louis in the big, empty, drawing-room, having been one of those to assist in carrying the unconscious old lady to bed, and to render her the first assistance. It was indeed a stroke, but a far slighter one than the first had been, and already the danger seemed past.

"It was my fault that this happened; if she had not seen me, the excitement would not have been."

"No, it is not your fault that this happened," answered Sir Louis, in a hard voice. "It is the fault of somebody quite different. I have not to forgive, but to thank you. If you had denied your *rôle* at that moment, the excitement would have been far greater, the results certainly much worse. She will be happy now when she awakes." And to himself he added, hopelessly, "I would to God that I could leave her in her delusion!"

Why not? The thought flashed through him again as he stood opposite to the schoolmistress. It had come to him more than once lately, only to be rejected as something too grotesque to be taken quite seriously. This time he actually looked the idea in the face, but once more he turned from it. No doubt it would be a solution of the difficulties—of his attitude towards his mother, but as yet he did not consider it a possible thing to do.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HILL FOOL.

On a late day in November, Miss Farthingall turned her face towards the hills. She had plenty of time for herself now, for the scarlet fever had actually broken out, and the school had been closed, and she spent a not inconsiderable part of her leisure in taking long walks in the directions best calculated to bring about occasional "chance" meetings with Sir Louis. To-day, indeed, she had no expectation of seeing him, for hunting had begun, and she knew that there had been a meet that morning at a village some distance off. But she took her walk all the same, although the afternoon was anything but an inviting one. The morning had been almost mild, but the north wind had arrived at midday, bringing with it a keen frost. The ground rang much harder than it had done a few hours ago, and the puddles began to crackle underfoot. In the western horizon there was a pile of dangerous-looking blue-grey clouds, which seemed to promise snow before evening, while some half-dozen gulls, driven inland by the stress of coming weather, darted restlessly backwards and forwards over the head of the solitary walker, filling the air with their short, ill-tempered cry.

But Miss Farthingall scarcely noticed her surroundings, for she was deep in thought, and not very satisfied thought, as the expression of her face betrayed. It was because, like most other people, she could think best when in motion that she had braved the wind to-day.

A month had passed since that most opportune mistake made by Lady Hepburne, and nothing further had happened. A feeling, not exactly of discouragement, but of depression, was on her—a mood to which her undaunted spirit seldom yielded, and in which, doubtless, the weather bore its share. She could not be sure that she was making progress, for she had not seen much of Sir Louis lately. Was this accident or design? Had she, perhaps, not been too precipitate in letting loose the tongues of gossip, and thus defeated her own end? She was wondering now what further step she could take. One of her secrets of success was the faculty of turning everything and every one into instruments. Thus she had made use of Miss Ward for one purpose, and of Edith Hepburne for another, knowing well that the news of her refusal of the doctor could not help reaching Sir Louis's ears when confided to his sister. Lady Hepburne had unconsciously offered herself as an instrument. Was there any one else who could serve her ends?

As for the doctor himself, it is certain that at any other moment she would have closed with his offer, for she was not as ambitious as she once had been. But just now she was playing for a much higher stake and, after a brief review of the situation, had determined to risk everything for its attainment. This proposal itself ought to help her a step nearer

to her goal. Besides, the doctor was short and podgy, and by no means satisfied what she called her "æsthetic tastes."

"Well, I suppose something will turn up!" was the thought with which she concluded her reflections. It had always been her principle that "things" generally turn up, and that all you had to do was to be on the look out, as she had told the sick Bella that day in May, when she had sat beside her in the London attic; and to this thought she always returned for comfort when she needed it.

"It is not that I have more opportunities than other people," she had said another time, "but that I know how to make use of them." The old remedy worked once more. She walked on more briskly, her sanguine spirit rising in proportion to the more rapid circulation of the blood.

"Something is sure to turn up!" And as she said it she could not guess how very near that something was that was destined to turn up.

By this time she was deep in one of the bare little valleys that wound away among the hills. As evening approached, the cold was increasing. A little rill, which in the recent rains had overflowed its bed and spread itself broadly over the hillside, had within the last few hours been arrested by the frost and turned into bits of broken glass. All at once, behind a big boulder close at hand, there was a clatter of rolling stones. Miss Farthingall started slightly, for she had met no living thing since quitting the village. She was still wondering what it could be, when from behind the rock a fine bay mare came trotting quietly past her, with its bridle hanging loose. Quickly she

put out her hand, her first instinct being to catch the riderless beast, but at sight of her movement the horse gave a plunge, and disappeared in the Stonefield direction.

Somebody had had a fall out hunting, she told herself without much interest at first, as she pursued her way. Well, it was no great wonder, with this sudden frost and so many slippery places to cross.

Presently, however, she stood still again, frightened by a thought that had come to her—Might not the fallen man be Sir Louis? She remembered distinctly having seen him riding just such a bay as this one, and, besides, the horse had taken the direction of Stonefield, and it would know its way to its stable. Supposing he were badly hurt? Supposing——? She shivered in genuine alarm, remembering the end of the last baronet, Sir Philip, who had found his death over one of the stone walls of this most unrideable country. Could it be that Sir Louis had shared his brother's fate?

She walked on faster, looking anxiously from side to side, in hopes of catching sight of the dismounted rider, but only naked boulders and withered furze met her eye. Several minutes had passed when, turning a sharp corner, she came close upon a man walking towards her. She knew him by sight: it was old Job Limple, who lived by himself in the very depth of this hilly desert, with neither chick nor child belonging to him, and who was but rarely seen in Stonefield except on Saturdays, when he emerged from his hermitage, laden with the rush baskets which he had fashioned during the week, and on whose produce he managed to exist. It was not Saturday to-day, and

although, from force of habit, Job's back curved visibly under an imaginary burden, there really was not so much as a single basket visible about him. He was a sturdy old man for his age; but either he was by nature only one step removed from an idiot, or else prolonged solitude had dulled his originally not over brilliant mental powers. At any rate, the appellation of "The Hill Fool," by which he usually went, was not wholly undeserved, even though he possessed wit enough to earn his living—which even wise people occasionally find a difficulty about. Had Miss Farthingall not stopped him, he would have scuttled past her with a touch of his leather cap; for—probably owing to the gaps which long disuse had made in his vocabulary—he dreaded nothing so much as having to speak.

But Miss Farthingall had no idea of letting him escape. This was exactly the man from whom she might hope to get the information she wanted.

"Tell me," she said, laying her hand on his fustian sleeve in order to arrest him, "have you not seen Sir Louis? I believe he has had a fall. The baronet, you know?" she repeated, shaking his sleeve a little.

Job Limple's eyes first wandered to the sky, then to the hillside, and finally to the ground. It was only when there was nothing else to look at that they returned perforce to Miss Farthingall's face.

"Eh—the baronet," he reluctantly repeated.

"Have you seen him?"

Again Job's eyes made the round of the horizon, while he evidently struggled with the dislike he felt to open his lips a second time. Miss Farthingall, in an agony of impatience, watched the foolish old face,

with its limp fringe of white hair framing the weather-beaten chin and cheeks. She knew that it was no use to hurry him.

"He's at my place," he uttered at last, with a supreme effort, and would have hurriedly gone by.

"At your place? In your house? Then he isn't killed? Thank Heaven! Is he badly hurt?"

"It's his foot, I'm thinking," Job managed to say, after having studied a particular stone at his own feet intently for some moments.

A few more questions, added to a great deal more patience, succeeded in convincing Miss Farthingall that the injury could not be very serious.

"And he has sent you for the doctor, I suppose?" she asked, much relieved.

Job nodded, thankful for the small mercy of being spared at least a monosyllable.

"And Sir Louis is all alone up there?"

Another nod.

"I see," she said, and remained thoughtful for a moment, still standing in such a position as to bar Job Limple's passage on the narrow path.

As she rapidly reviewed the situation she was gnawing gently at her under lip. There were possibilities here—great possibilities—and the question was—how to make the best use of them?"

"Listen!" she said, after a minute. "Was it Dr. Bridges that Sir Louis told you to fetch?" And when he had signified "Yes," she went on, "Well, it is lucky you met me, for I happen to know that Dr. Bridges is not at home; you will have to go for Dr. Ward. It is further off, of course, but that doesn't matter, for Dr. Ward is a better doctor, at any rate.

You needn't go into Stonefield at all—that would only lose time: do you understand me?—but just take the path that leads straight down the hill, and go off direct to Heywood. In two hours Dr. Ward can be here, and I will look after Sir Louis meanwhile. Have you quite understood what you have to do?"

"I'm to faitch Dr. Ward," he brought out after the usual interval.

Within the next minute the Hill Fool, bent under the imaginary rush baskets, was once more trudging down-hill, while Miss Farthingall hurried upwards with flying pulses and a heart that was beating half in alarm and half in exultation. It was rather a risky thing that she had done, but she thought it worth doing. By sending Job Limple for Dr. Ward instead of for Dr. Bridges, she would gain at least three hours alone with Sir Louis—three hours during which she would appear before his eyes in the light of a saving angel; hours, therefore, that were worth immeasurably more than twice that number under ordinary circumstances. She knew that Job would do exactly as she had told him, for a sheep-like, uninquiring obedience was one of his chief virtues. Indeed, he would have started for London on foot just as readily, if he had been ordered, and would never even have thought of telling any one his errand on the way. Then, again, the risk was really not great; Dr. Bridges might very possibly *not* be at home, though she had no particular reason for believing so; and if any one should wonder at the more distant doctor having been sent for, it would of course be put down to the idiocy of the Hill Fool, who, in order to justify himself, would have

to speak, and would therefore certainly remain unjustified.

Ten minutes' rapid walking brought her to Job Limple's "place,"—a rough stone construction, perched on the edge of what had once been a big quarry. Thirty years ago, when the quarry had been in full swing, this house had been built to serve as a sleeping-place for those of the workmen who came from a distance, and as a refuge for all in bad weather. No more stones were carted away now, for it had proved an unprofitable undertaking, and the disused quarry had been seized upon by heather and gorse and fern, but the refuge hut still stood, and Job Limple still lived on there, as in the days when he had worked here as a quarryman, and no one disputed his right to do so, seeing that no one envied him his abode.

The wind was sweeping round and round the solitary house, and whistled mournfully among the dead winter grass, as Miss Farthingall paused before the door to draw breath. The path ceased here—it had never gone further than the quarry, which had been its only reason for existence. In the hollow, which fell away in a sheer descent almost at her feet, she could see the brown, broken-backed bracken that grew in the clefts of the stone, swaying from side to side; but down in the depth the bushes were hard to distinguish, for the November dusk was upon the world already.

From inside the house there came no sound. Perhaps he had fainted? She was beginning to feel frightened again, when Sir Louis's voice said sharply from within—

"Who is there?"

CHAPTER XVI.

A MINISTERING ANGEL.

She lifted the latch and entered.

In the small, bare room into which she stepped directly, Sir Louis, looking rather pale by contrast with the scarlet of his hunting-coat, and with disordered hair and collar, was sitting on one rush-bottomed chair, his left foot resting on a second. On a deal table at his elbow stood a bottle and tumbler. He stared at the entering figure with incredulous eyes, not sure whether the dusk was not deceiving him.

"Miss Farthingall! You here? How on earth does this happen?"

"Yes, it is I. I will explain directly. But tell me first, for goodness' sake, what has happened. Are you badly hurt?"

"Only so-so," said Sir Louis; but in the attempt to laugh he made a grimace suggestive of acute pain. "It's that beastly turn the weather has taken—I beg your pardon—I mean this most uncalled-for frost. We had given up the run as a bad job, and I was taking a short cut home, when my beast slipped right away from under me. It was all I could do to drag myself here, but I don't believe there's any real harm done."

"We'll see that directly," said Miss Farthingall, divesting herself of the shawl she had worn over her jacket, and beginning to pull off her gloves, with a business-like air which pleased him far better than a display of sentiment could have done at this moment. "Good gracious! you've still got your boot on!"

"I couldn't get it off," said Sir Louis, making another grimace, "and there was no one to help me, since I had to send that idiot for the doctor; it was all he was fit for. I made him put the brandy bottle near me, in case of my feeling queer, and then I just turned him out."

"Well, I am here now, but it's too late for pulling off the boot; the swelling is far too advanced by this time. It will have to be cut off."

She was bending over his foot now, and examining it.

"Can't it wait till the doctor comes?" asked Sir Louis doubtfully, aware of a strange reluctance to being waited upon by Miss Farthingall.

"Certainly not. The doctor would never forgive me if I did not do it at once. Do you happen to have a knife about you?"

He did not happen to have one, but presently she returned from the adjoining kitchen with an ancient but well sharpened clasp-knife.

"But, Miss Farthingall," said Sir Louis, somewhat feebly, as she quietly knelt down on the floor beside him.

She had apparently not heard, being absorbed in gently but surely ripping up the leather of his riding-boot. It took several minutes' work, the leather

being stout and the foot already badly swollen; and Sir Louis, recognizing the necessity of remaining immovable, could only look on wonderingly, and marvel at the deftness and accuracy with which those small hands worked. As the heavy boot fell to the floor an exclamation of relief escaped him.

She looked up at him and smiled.

"I told you so! You will feel quite different now."

Then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, she gently pulled off the sock, and began closely examining the injured foot, passing her fingertips softly along the swollen surface, and occasionally pressing lightly upon some particular spot.

"I don't think it can be a fracture," she said at last; "most likely only a bad sprain, or possibly a dislocation. Anyway, it must be bandaged immediately; a cold compress will keep the swelling down."

"But surely *you* are not going to bandage it?" he asked, with a last attempt at resistance.

"Of course I am; why not? I picked up a good many nursing dodges in Australia, and a bandage isn't hard to settle. The question is, What shall I make it of?"

She rose from her knees and began looking about the room. A few minutes' search brought to light a couple of clean towels, but they were rough and hard, and she shook her head as she fingered their surface. Then, pulling out her handkerchief, she folded it as required, and laid it to soak in a basin of water.

"But I must get you to the bed first," she said decisively. "I can do it more easily there."

There stood a low trestle-bed in the corner of the room, covered only with a rough blanket. She went up and inspected it, and ended by spreading her shawl carefully over the blanket. He watched her without comment, beginning to feel helpless in her hands.

"Now," she said, returning to him, "you must manage to stand up somehow. Take a mouthful of brandy first—there! and you can lean with your hand on my shoulder. Don't be afraid to press too hard; I'm much stronger than I look."

Two minutes later Sir Louis lay on the Hill Fool's bed, reposing on Miss Farthingall's shawl, and with his foot neatly bandaged with her handkerchief and by her hands.

Just as she turned from the bed he laughed aloud, not very joyfully.

"What is the matter?"

"The situation tickles my fancy, that's all. By-the-by, you haven't told me yet how you come to be here?"

"I first met your horse and then Job Limple. I knew that you were alone here and in pain. Is that not enough?"

"I suppose it is; I'm a fellow-creature, after all."

He said it with a certain emphasis, which was to remind her that to her he meant to be just a fellow-creature and nothing else, but she answered nothing.

"What are you doing?" he asked within the same minute, for she was taking off her hat and was unbuttoning her jacket. "I have all I want now, and you must be going immediately if you want to get home by daylight."

She went on unbuttoning her jacket.

"And did you suppose I was going to leave you to yourself in your present state?"

"How long do you mean to stay?" he asked uneasily.

"Till the doctor comes, of course."

"But that may be some time yet."

"That doesn't matter; I have nothing to hurry for."

He was silent. The idea of Miss Farthingall being found here by the doctor did not suit him at all, but there was absolutely nothing for it, seeing that she *would* not leave the spot and that he *could* not. Besides, how could he even protest? What she had done as yet was only strictly in accordance with the most ordinary Christian charity.

Having freed herself of her jacket, she proceeded to light a fire in the empty grate, and presently the gloom of the chilly room was illuminated by a cheery red flame, and enlivened by a brisk crackling of twigs.

"Do you think you could eat anything?" she asked, as she rose from her knees.

"I almost think I could, now that you mention it. I missed my luncheon to-day. But you're not going to give me twigs to eat, are you? and there doesn't seem to be anything else about."

"Who knows? The Hill Fool can't live upon twigs. I'll soon find out."

What she did find was only a chunk of cheese and half a loaf of bread, but it did for the moment. She would not let him sit up in bed for fear of disturbing his foot, and the result was that she had to cut the bread and cheese into little bits and feed him with it like a child, or a canary-bird, as he suggested, trying

to put upon the matter as jocular an air as it would allow of.

"There's some over," said Miss Farthingall, when he had finished. "I suppose I may have some too."

And she sat down, and, there before his eyes, with Job Limple's coarse knife to cut it with, ate the strong-smelling cheese hungrily, and yet as daintily as though she were eating strawberries with a silver spoon. There never was anything, however distantly, offensive about Miss Farthingall, even in such prosaic moments as this. Things, which in another woman might have repulsed, appeared quite harmless in her, seeing that she had a certain way of flitting over the vulgarities of life without appearing to identify herself with them, a trick which seemed to put her on a different level from common people.

"There's bad weather coming," said Sir Louis presently.

Within the last few minutes the shocks of wind had been increasing in strength. The scrap of curtain before the ill-closed window waved as though moved by hands, and even the shawl on the bed seemed alive, for the loosely-constructed house—little more than a heap of stones—was apt, on windy nights, to become a mere trapful of draughts. A loose slate rattled on the roof, and from the hollow below there came strange, moaning sounds, where the gusts were caught in the holes of the old quarry, and could not find their way out again.

"Is that not snow?"

She rose and went to the window. Yes, sure enough—the first white flakes were driving over the

pane, flying almost horizontally before the ever-increasing wind.

"Poor old Dr. Bridges!" said Sir Louis. "It will be a hard piece of work to get him up here if this holds on."

Miss Farthingall said nothing. From where she stood she could judge of the situation much better than he, and the look of the western sky, so far as she could see it in the falling darkness, told her what sort of a night was coming.

"Hard work indeed," she reflected, "if they can get him up at all."

She felt her heart leap at the thought which had come to her, though also it was a little startling. She had not counted on anything like this; all she had plotted for was a few hours alone with him.

In another ten minutes it became necessary to light one of the two tallow dips she had found in the kitchen cupboard. She had put off the moment as long as possible, in order not to alarm Sir Louis by the admission that night had actually come.

"I can't understand their not being here yet," he said somewhat crossly.

"Very likely the doctor was not at home, or else Job Limple may have mistaken your directions. It would be like the Hill Fool to make a mess of the thing."

"Anyway, you ought to be going, Miss Farthingall," he said, rousing himself to one more effort. "It really seems that a snowstorm is brewing; and how do you know that you can get down later? This may be your last chance."

"I don't mean to take it, though. You know that I can't leave you alone."

"You ought to know that you can't risk being found here," he answered, with rising irritation. "You used to be far more careful of your reputation than this."

She turned rather pale as she answered lower, "My reputation is nothing to me in comparison to your safety—or even your comfort."

A flame leapt to her eyes as she said it. It was the first moment in which her studiously business-like manner had given way.

He turned his head on the pillow in order not to have to see her face, and in doing so inadvertently twitched his foot and uttered an exclamation of pain. She was by his side in a moment, placing back the foot in the right position and holding brandy to his lips.

The window-pane had grown black by this time, and the snow could only be heard, no longer seen. The moans down there in the hollow had swelled to bawls, as piteous as though they came from the throats of myriads of wild beasts imprisoned in a pit, and occasionally there was a rumble like thunder, when some loose stone got dislodged and went rolling and leaping down the sides of the quarry.

Sir Louis lay still with closed eyes, pretending to doze. It was the best way of avoiding having to say something. He did not know whether to feel more provoked or more touched by Miss Farthingall's flat refusal to leave him, but on the whole irritation had the upper hand. The situation had its absurd side too. What welcome food this would be to the gossip-mongers! That thought in itself was enough to in-

cline the balance on the side of disapproval. It would not have mattered so much if he had been seriously hurt, but this was evidently only a bad sprain; he would be about again in a few days, and the whole thing would have the look of a sham. On the other hand, again, it was impossible for the mere bodily man not to feel grateful for the mere bodily comforts he was enjoying. He had only to picture himself still sitting on the rush-bottomed chair, as he had been at her entrance, in the cold and presently the darkness, unable to reach either light or food for himself, and perhaps sitting on thus into the small hours of the morning, with only the howling wind to listen to—he had only to think of it in order to realize how fortunate, in one sense, at least, had been Miss Farthingall's appearance on the scene, how much he owed to her deft ministrations. Would she have done this for any other fellow-creature? He hardly thought so. Though pretending to doze, he now and then opened his lids just enough to watch her as she sat with her elbow on the table, shading her eyes from the light of the candle. Some remnant of that early tinge of distrust, which occasionally overcame him still, made him wish to find out what she looked like when she thought herself unobserved.

But before what he now espied in her face, mistrust perforce faded. In the eyes that looked upon him, not knowing that he could see, there was the same passion written, of which he had caught a glimpse that day in the lane—only more broadly, more undisguisedly written, since they deemed themselves unmarked. Even her lips had grown unsteady with the emotion against which she vainly struggled. Sir

Louis, as he looked, felt the sharpest pang of self-reproach he had ever yet felt. He had no cognizance of any acting which could feign anything so convincing as this. And in truth Miss Farthingall was not acting just now, just as she had had no need to act all summer—so far as her feelings towards him were concerned. What she felt for the time being really was love—even though only love of a sort—and this most fortunate circumstance it was which had made her task so easy, for without it there would have unavoidably come moments when even her consummate art would have been at fault.

The hours began to pass, with only here and there a word spoken. The dull flame of the candle, moving in the constant draught, played dimly upon the pale gold of the schoolmistress's hair and the scarlet of Sir Louis's coat. In the intervals between the furious gusts, the swish of the driving flakes upon the window could be plainly heard. From underneath the loosely-hung door the snow had drifted in and formed a tiny wreath on the floor. At moments it seemed as though the storm were bent on carrying the rough house over the edge of the cliff and into that howling pit below. There was nothing more said about the doctor; the idea of expecting him before morning seemed absurd.

Midnight was past when at length Sir Louis managed to fall into a genuine doze, uneasy because of the throbbing of his foot, yet a relief after the long day. When he awoke again the wind had somewhat subsided, but it was still pitch-dark outside, and the second tallow candle had taken the place of the first, while the fire too had evidently been kept up, for it

still flickered brightly. Opening his eyes, he found himself looking straight into those of Miss Farthingall, who was bending over him with parted lips. She started back a little, but on some impulse he put out his hand and took hold of hers.

"It's you again!" he said, with a short, sleepy laugh. "You seem to be my fate!"

And then, looking at her face, that was pale with watching, it occurred to him that he had not yet thanked her with one word.

"You're very good to me," he said, looking hard into her face and still holding her hand. "Better than I have deserved of you."

He saw the colour rising to her white cheek, and then suddenly, to his astonishment and almost consternation, she stooped and kissed him quickly on the lips. Her own were very soft and fresh—so fresh that, despite the consternation, he almost wished that she would go on, but after that quick movement she turned abruptly from the bed.

And now a great wave of pity came over him, as he asked himself what the wretched girl must be feeling after so open a self-betrayal. All at once the part he was playing appeared to himself contemptible beyond words. In some ways it was almost a pity that it should be so impossible to marry her. The next thought that came was—"Why impossible? Do I mean to mourn all my life for a woman who does not love me?" And if it was to be any other, why not this one? He had often heard that the next best thing to being happy one's self was to make some one else happy. Besides, did it not really seem as though the finger of fate were here at work?

When he spoke again, after a long pause, it was in a queer, abrupt voice, which she had not heard before.

"Tell me," he said unexpectedly, "would you mind marrying some one who was not in love with you?"

The question did not sound quite as unconventional as it would have sounded under more conventional circumstances.

She was sitting again beside the table, and she started visibly.

"Not if I loved him," she answered at last, very low.

"But you once said that love ought to be equal on both sides?"

"Did I? Perhaps,—I forget. I don't think I meant it exactly like that."

Her face was turned from him, and he could see by the heaving of her breast that her breath was coming fast.

How would it be if he could manage to revive his feeling for her? he asked himself as he watched her. He supposed he must have felt something for her in the days when he helped her to gather roses. And undoubtedly she was pretty, and as refined a wife as ever he could wish for. Her hair was a lovely colour —the palest gold he had ever seen; yes, he supposed pale gold was the proper technical expression for it. And her complexion was perfect, and those tiny hands of hers——

As she sat thus turned away he leisurely looked her all over—as much of her as he could see—dwelling on each perfection with the deliberate intention of

inflaming his imagination. It was a pity that he could not see her whole face, he thought, for that might have made the task easier. What a solution of difficulties it would be if he could manage to feel something for her! To his mother it would be no loss, only an exchange—to his beloved mother who, ever since that chance meeting at the gates, had been daily looking for a visit of the beautiful, fair-haired Flo. For a fortnight she had lived on the mere bliss of the vision—but this last fortnight had brought him close to the end of his wits. Either this or something else would soon have to be done. Was it quite impossible for him to warm to the idea? Perhaps the brandy might help him. He put his hand out to the glass beside him on the chair and swallowed a mouthful.

Yes, she was a woman worthy of being coveted. What a soft curve of shoulder, and how white must be the arm hidden away in that sleeve of poor black stuff!

He took another mouthful of brandy, and continued his reflections with a dogged steadiness of purpose quite his own. Yes, and she would look better, too, if she were properly dressed; he need not be ashamed of her anywhere. And what a plucky little body it was, too! The situation could scarcely be more painful to her than it was. At this very moment she was probably waiting with bated breath for the sound of his next words, and yet what self-control spoke from her whole attitude! And the humility of her passion, was it not enough to soften a man's heart? When she looked at him with those blue eyes of hers, did she not seem to be begging pardon for loving him too much? He began to wish that she would turn

now and look at him in that way; very likely it would work better than the brandy. She was shivering, too, as he now noticed, and at the same moment he remembered that he was lying on her shawl.

His temples were beginning to throb—was that the brandy, after all? It was certain that she loved him, and she was prettier than he had imagined. Now that curve of white throat——

Suddenly he groaned, and turned his face to the wall. It would not do, after all; another face had come between him and the one on which he was attempting to fix his attention; a pair of well-known grey eyes had surprised him by their clearness, looking up shyly from under black lashes.

And, again, the hours began to pass, but he did not sleep any more, but lay there, trying to bring himself to some resolution, and ever again recoiling from the thought of what it implied, from time to time putting out his hand towards the brandy glass, and seeking therein to stimulate his mental energy.

He had not yet succeeded, when at length the square of window began to grow pale; the long winter's night was drawing to a close. In another half-hour the guttering end of candle had become superfluous. By the ghastly light of the November morning, Miss Farthingall's face revealed itself as haggard and heavy-eyed. She had scarcely spoken since the moment when she had kissed him. It had been done on impulse, and yet not wholly on impulse, since even in doing it she had been conscious of the thought, "If this does not bring him to the point then nothing will!" It was the last card which she felt it in her power to play. And now there began to press upon

her the humiliating conviction that it had been played in vain. The night was over, and so was the storm; they would not long be alone, and still he had said nothing which could bind him. As she moved about listlessly between the fireplace and the table, the spirit seemed to have gone out of her. Bodily fatigue and mental disappointment were equally at work; discouragement had hold of her at last.

"They are coming!" she said presently, standing still by the window.

It was almost broad daylight now, and from down the valley the sound of steps and voices could be heard ringing back sharply from the hard-frozen ground.

In ten minutes more the Hill Fool's small apartment had become almost too small for the breathlessly bursting-in party. They had done what they could, but the attempt made in the night had been a failure, and even by daylight the snowdrifts had proved no mean obstacle. It was a larger party than had been expected, the report of Sir Louis's mishap having spread since the previous night, and induced Dr. Bridges to volunteer his services besides those of Dr. Ward, while the vicar's chronic anxiety as to the health of humanity in general, having taken an acute form in consequence of the news, had driven him to join the rescuing party. But this was not all, for, behind the vicar's broad figure, Sir Louis caught sight of an extremely spare one, belonging actually to the Tiger-Lily in person, whose devouring curiosity as to what might be going on here—for she had managed to extract from the Hill Fool the fact of his meeting with Miss Farthingall—had pushed her to brave the snow-drifts in order to accompany her brother to the

spot. The mixed sensations of gratitude and fury which had possessed her since the day of the refusal—gratitude for letting him run, and fury for daring to decline so undoubted an honour—kept her interest in each one of the schoolmistress's actions at boiling-point. Sir Louis saw her eyes light up as they fell on Miss Farthingall, but she waited to speak until the first burst of exclamations was over.

"What a comfort to see that you are safe!" she then observed, turning to the schoolmistress with a dangerous suavity of accent. "They are in a regular state about you down at the school-house. None of them could imagine where you had slept."

"I did not sleep at all," answered Miss Farthingall, indifferently.

"You don't look as if you had. But you must have spent the night somewhere. I trust you were not without shelter?"

"No, I was not. I was here."

"Here in this hut?"

"Yes."

"With Sir Louis? All night?" Miss Ward actually stammered in her consternation at the boldness of the admission. "How very unfortunate!"

"Yes, with Sir Louis, all night," repeated the schoolmistress, with returning spirit, as she looked her adversary in the eyes. "What of that? And why is it unfortunate?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. The vicar looked from one face to the other, and wished he could think of something to say which would hurt no one's feelings. Dr. Bridges rubbed his glasses carefully, and Dr. Ward grew so much redder than

he was by nature, that at this moment he bore as much resemblance to a peony as his sister did to a tiger-lily.

"Oh, nothing of that. It is only so far unfortunate as a young person is so easily exposed to remark."

"Did you suppose I would leave him in his injured state?"

"No," said Miss Ward, with cruel slowness; "I never would have supposed that. It would not have been like you to miss so good an opportunity for making yourself agreeable to——"

Sir Louis suddenly raised himself on the bed. The resolution, which neither the brandy-bottle nor the artificial raptures over Miss Farthingall's charms had been able to give him, he had found in the Tiger-Lily's merciless accents, in the malevolent glance of her sunken, old-maidish eyes.

"Miss Ward," he began, in a tone which shook with irritation, "pardon me if I interrupt you; but you seem about to say something disrespectful of this —lady. Before you go on, I should like to tell you that you are speaking of my future wife."

There was a moment's dead silence. Miss Ward's withered right hand remained poised in mid-air; the one doctor ceased polishing his spectacles, while the other, from having been a red peony, became abruptly transformed into a white one; and yet he was not so white as Miss Farthingall herself. Nearly half a minute passed before Miss Ward's fixed hand relaxed and dropped to her side.

"I don't think I quite understand," she said, hoarsely and incredulously.

"Do you not?" asked Sir Louis, quite calm by

this time. "I can be more explicit if you like. What I said was that I mean to marry that lady there"—and he indicated Miss Farthingall—"as soon as ever you brother has mended my foot for me. Is that clear enough now?"

And, to judge from the faces around, it certainly was quite clear.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOME AGAIN.

Mr. Crossley sat in his beloved study, profoundly thankful to be looking out at the familiar beech trees of the Heywood park, instead of at the acacias and orange-groves of Nice. The continental tour undertaken last summer for the purpose of letting a little grass grow over the matter of the broken engagement, had expanded to unlooked-for dimensions, since, owing to a bad cold caught in autumn, the doctors had considered it advisable for Florence to winter abroad. To so home-loving a person as Mr. Crossley, it had been a distinct sacrifice to face an hotel winter, but from the moment that he thought to detect in Florence a hereditary trace of her mother's delicacy of constitution he forgot everything in the panic which came over him.

The broken engagement itself had, of course, been a shock in its way, though the idea of thwarting his daughter's wishes occurred to him as little now as it had done in the nursery and schoolroom days. This was a rather more serious caprice, certainly, than had been the desire for expensive playthings, or the objection to taking medicine, and the gentle amusement he had been apt to feel on these occasions was this time re-

placed by a sense of unmistakable disappointment. It might have been as well, perhaps, if she had been taught to listen to reason earlier, but it was too late to begin that now, and a mere attempt would entail scenes of a sort which his sensitive organization had never been able to endure. Therefore Mr. Crossley ended by confining himself to sighing and regretfully reflecting that if her mother had been living it would probably never have come to this. It was but another reason for mourning for that for which he had never ceased to weep.

The news of the most extraordinary marriage by which Sir Louis Hepburne had, early in the winter, electrified the county, had in some degree helped to lessen Mr. Crossley's regrets. That he should marry a schoolmistress was bad enough, but that he should do so not eight months after he had proposed for Florence's hand seemed to show that his affections stood on no very sure foundation. Very likely this seeming misfortune was in reality a piece of luck in disguise, and his beloved child had escaped a worthless husband.

There was a gentle smile on Mr. Crossley's handsome features as he gazed at the new green of the old beech trees. Life was becoming once more endurable, if not enjoyable. Florence was strong again, though rather thinner than she used to be, and that dreadful hotel episode was over. What he had suffered in its course no one but Mr. Crossley himself knew; for, although this suave old gentleman was far too intrinsically amiable to abuse a waiter, or even to scowl at him, he yet belonged to the order of those whose happiness is complete only when their boots are blacked to

exactly the right degree, and replaced on exactly the right spot, and to whom an over or an under-done egg is capable of throwing its shadow over an entire forenoon. As he now looked round at the familiar objects so long missed, he became more than ever convinced that there is no place like home. Books and portraits—it was about all that the room contained—portraits of the dead woman he had loved, and books which were to help him to forget her, but had not very well succeeded. It was generally accepted in the county that Mr. Crossley was "learned," but in reality he had never become more than a desultory student, who, by dint of taking up various courses of reading in turn, and carrying them on just so far as they amused him, had arrived at knowing a little about everything and not very much about anything. It was a sort of mental pottering about between the most miscellaneous sciences; chemistry, mathematics, historical research, they each had had their turn, and each been dropped again when they had served their purpose of deadening memory for a while.

To-day, however, there was no book before him, only a note which had come by the early post and which would have to be answered. He was still wondering what the answer should be when a touch on his shoulder aroused him to the presence of his daughter.

She had certainly lost something in flesh since last year, but nothing in looks. Perhaps it was the slight falling away in her figure which made it appear as though she had grown, while the somewhat less rounded cheek gave to her beauty the touch of delicacy which it had wanted before.

"I wish to ask you about that new family in the village," she began.

"At it again, Miss Providence?" the old gentleman smiled in return. "But wait a minute, for I, too, have something to ask. What answer am I to give to this?" And he held the note towards her.

"Accept it, of course," was the verdict she gave, having read the few lines.

Mr. Crossley fingered a pen doubtfully.

"But have you reflected that Manseley is only two miles from Stonefield?"

"What of that?" she asked flushing.

"The chances are that the Hepburnes will be there, such near neighbours as that, and Mrs. Linton is exactly the woman to invite the wrong people, besides, it's their farewell dinner before going to town. I thought you mightn't enjoy a meeting."

"I don't say that I shall enjoy it, but I certainly don't mean to shirk it. We can't go on hiding from each other for ever, and since a beginning will have to be made, this opportunity will do as well as any other."

"I don't see why the beginning need be made just yet; the longer the pause the less awkwardness there would be about the meeting."

But Florence shook her head decisively. "That is not my idea at all. When an unpleasant thing is in prospect, it's always better to get it over at once. Besides, why should I mind meeting Sir Louis?" she added, with an inflection of defiance in her voice. "I have nothing to reproach myself with on his account."

Mr. Crossley stroked his silver beard in silence. Seeing that he had never clearly understood the reason of the rupture, it was of course impossible for him to answer this question.

"Then what am I to say?" he asked instead.

"You are to say, of course, that we shall be happy to come on Tuesday."

Mr. Crossley sighed, and dipped his pen in ink. Merely to dine out was in itself a sacrifice, though one to which, since Florence's coming out, he had gradually had to resign himself, and the meeting in prospect for Tuesday was distinctly distasteful, but, as usual, he bowed to his daughter's will.

As for Florence, she left the room with heightened colour and a fast-beating heart. Despite the proud indifference assumed, the impending event had set all her nerves tingling. If she had not already known that she loved him still, the flutter of her senses would have told her so to-day. After all that was past, there was no disguising from herself the fact that she felt for him now exactly what she had felt at the moment when she stood beside her betrothed on the terrace in the May twilight just a year ago, and complained of her too great burden of happiness. There was no more excess of happiness to complain of now; the burden had been lifted, or rather she had forcibly rid herself of it, but, strangely enough, the peace she had thought to purchase by the sacrifice had not yet come. It was not that she reproached herself with what she still considered to have been the right and just thing to do, but simply that the love which she had thought herself strong enough to kill, merely by resolving to do so, would not die at her command,

would not bow to her will, as she was accustomed to see the people around her doing.

The news of the accomplished marriage had been at once a triumph and a blow. In the third place, it was a complete surprise; for although it was what she had wanted him to do, it was what he had at their parting declared he would never do. After all, he must not be quite so bad a man as she had taken him for; it was a comfort to be able to respect him, though of course from this moment onwards he must become a mere acquaintance. To see him by the side of his wife, actually and visibly a married man, might possibly help to make her realize the barrier between them, and this reflection, too, it was which nerved her for the meeting. Besides, it was necessary that she should assure herself with her own eyes of the success of her experiment. Altogether there were reasons enough to wish for Tuesday, quite without counting the devouring longing for the sight of the man she had sworn to herself to forget.

It was while dressing for the evening that the consciousness of this longing came over her in a moment, and caused her to stop in the very act of fastening a diamond star in her hair. She had remembered that Louis had liked her to wear that star, and she thought she detected in herself the desire to look well in his eyes. This was of course not allowable, and deliberately unfastening the star, she chose a quieter ornament, and even at the last moment changed her mind about her dress, and, just in order to punish herself for that wicked desire, put on a sober grey silk, instead of the rich, creamy satin which had been lying ready on the bed.

After all, the actual moment of meeting was a little less trying than she had pictured it, owing to the fact that, being the last arrivals, she and her father found the room full, and that a round of hasty greetings was followed by an immediate adjournment to the dining-room. What between the bustle and the sense of flurry which overcame her, Florence scarcely knew whether among the salutations responded to she had also heard one from Sir Louis, or whether one of the hands she had hastily shaken possibly belonged to his wife. It was only when she found herself seated at table between a harmless young country squire and a diminutive curate, that it became possible to take stock of the situation.

Yes, to be sure, her father had been right; Mrs. Linton had assembled all her neighbours to-day. There he was—fortunately at the same side of the table as herself, so that there was no danger of their looks crossing. She was horrified to feel how her heart leapt at the sight of the dark head towering over that of every man at the table, and how it sank again as her eyes fell on a pink-clad figure straight opposite. There she was—but oh, what a metamorphosis from the modest, plainly attired little schoolmistress of other days! This smiling, radiant being, exquisitely appointed in floating pink draperies, and wearing diamond bracelets with the *nonchalance* of a dowager, seemed to be the butterfly which had emerged from that soberly-tinted chrysalis. Florence felt it hard to take her eyes off her. Could six months, and so-and-so many yards of pink *crêpe*, make such a difference as this? No, it was not the six months, it was the *crêpe* alone which had done it, was the conclusion

she presently came to. It was not practice which this woman had wanted, only opportunity. This was the sort of thing to which she was born; and probably she had put on her clothes with exactly this air, and taken her place at table with exactly this *aplomb* on the morrow of her marriage. Thus Florence told herself as she somewhat blankly responded to the friendly nod and smile with which Lady Hepburne was greeting her across the table. There could be no doubt, at any rate, that she was happy. It was not only that the smiles came so readily, disclosing the pearly teeth in quick, brilliant flashes, but that even in repose the swelling lips seemed scarcely able to contain the exultation working within. The very movements of her figure, and each caressing touch of her fingers upon her rings, spoke of a state of satisfaction rarely seen so entirely without flaw. No one looking at her could doubt that here was a person who had got exactly what she wanted, and was drinking of life in the fullest draughts to be swallowed. To see her so happy surely argued well for Sir Louis's own happiness, thought Florence. Ought she not to be content? She told herself severely that she ought, only to detect herself watching Lady Hepburne with an interest which, to say the least, was foolish, instead of talking to her long-suffering neighbours. What she was trying to detect was some symptom of that devotion whose betrayal, by touching her so deeply at the time of their first acquaintance, had indirectly led to the rupture, and which, after barely six months of married life, ought surely still to be in its first freshness. Yet, watch as she would, she could not discover Lady Hepburne's eyes ever wandering in the direction in which

she knew that Sir Louis was seated. So far as she could make out, there was not so much as a glance exchanged during the whole course of dinner. Lady Hepburne was far too pleasantly occupied with her neighbours and with her dinner to have time for anything approaching to sentimentality; and, despite the lively conversation she kept up, she ate a very good dinner indeed. Noting the appreciative glances thrown upon every new dish presented, and the manner in which the rosy tongue-tip collected each precious drop after every fresh mouthful of champagne—it could not be called anything so vulgar as licking one's lips, but it was nevertheless suggestive in the extreme—Florence found her thoughts carried back to the day of their first acquaintance, and to the look on the schoolmistress's face at the moment when the tea-tray was brought in. That time the eagerness in the blue eyes had touched her with keen pity; this time this same eagerness struck her in quite a different way, perhaps because she was inclined to be more critical, or perhaps because it was clearly impossible to feel the same pity for the brilliant Lady Hepburne as for the half-starved Miss Farthingall.

It was when she found herself in the drawing-room again that Florence discovered within herself a new feeling of repugnance or terror—she scarcely knew which. The dozen or so ladies of the party were beginning to fall into groups. "I hope to goodness she is not going to gush to me about her happiness," said Florence to herself, apprehensively. "She is coming in my direction."

But Lady Hepburne was evidently not thinking of anything of the sort. She smiled at Florence indeed

as she passed, and even gave her hand a furtive little pressure, as though to mark the existence of some mutual understanding; but, to judge from her wandering eyes, her thoughts were evidently elsewhere.

"Ah, Mrs. Linton!" she exclaimed in the same instant, on catching sight of their hostess close by. "I've been trying to capture you all the evening. It's about that bonnet, you know. You said you would be so good as to see about it for me in town."

"I'll see about a dozen bonnets, if you like," grinned Mrs. Linton, a dressy little woman with a sharp nose and lively black eyes. "There could scarcely be a more grateful task, seeing that almost anything ought to look well on that delightful hair of yours; but wouldn't you prefer to see about it yourself? Surely Sir Louis is not going to be so cruel as to keep you down here to the very end of the season —and a rattling good season it is, too, from all I hear."

"He says he is too busy with his improvements. The windows are to be widened, or the moat filled up, or something, so he can't get away."

As she spoke, the first cloud which had dimmed Lady Hepburne's radiancy that evening passed over her face while Florence's listening ears seemed to catch the sound of a fleeting sigh. She stood near enough to have taken part in the conversation, had she wanted, but in her astonishment she could do nothing but look and listen. She had been prepared for a good deal from Miss Farthingall, but scarcely to see her take her place so effectively in society, and apparently so entirely without a struggle. Why, here was the Honourable Mrs. Linton known to be the most "difficult" person in the county, so far as pedigrees were

concerned, talking to the former schoolmistress as though they had been intimates all their lives! And it was not merely because she happened to be the wife of Sir Louis Hepburne that people accepted her, as Florence could not help recognizing, but principally because she was herself, and would have forced almost any society to accept her on the strength of her individuality, just as she had forced the recreant schoolboy to respect her, in spite of her size.

"I'd run away if I were you," Mrs. Linton was saying confidentially.

"It's rather early, after six months, isn't it?" laughed back the younger woman. "But I won't answer for myself next year."

Florence fell into a new phase of wonder. How was it possible to be Louis's wife, and yet to entertain any such petty hankerings as these words implied? What could a London season be to any woman who possessed such a treasure as his love? And how could place or surroundings count if she loved him? And Cordelia had seemed to love him only last year. Florence could not doubt it as she recalled the fire that had leapt to the blue eyes in reply to that fierce question of her own, put on the day of the rupture. Once only in the course of the evening that followed did Florence again catch sight of that same look on the young wife's face. As the men came trooping in from the dining-room, it happened that Sir Louis had for companion the same diminutive curate who had taken Florence in to dinner, and, entering the room, was forced to bend his head in order to catch his companion's remarks. The contrast between the two figures was one which, as the French say, "leapt at the eyes."

"What a height!" admiringly remarked the lady next to Lady Hepburne. "You ought to feel proud of having subjugated such a giant."

"Yes, he is splendidly big, is he not?" replied the wife.

It was at this moment that across the room Florence caught sight of Lady Hepburne's eyes lighting up as they fixed themselves on her husband, and her heart throbbed with a mixture of jealousy and satisfaction. It was a satisfaction that she should love him; but, oh, it was hard not to grudge her the right of doing so. Had her own attention not been claimed at that moment, she might have noted how, from her husband, Lady Hepburne's blue eyes passed on to the man behind him, who happened to be the one great dandy of the neighbourhood, and the possessor of a set of almost painfully regular features, and how—whether or not in answer to an invitation in those blue eyes it was hard to say—Lord Arlington had within the next minute taken possession of the vacant chair beside her.

The evening was a long and weary one for Florence. Of Sir Louis she only caught occasional glimpses in the further drawing-room, while, under the stress of conversation, it became impossible to pursue her observation of his wife.

It was not until cloaking for departure that the chief moment of the evening arrived. Several carriages had been announced at once, and in the lobby there was a tolerable bustle in progress. Florence, standing a little apart, felt her cloak laid upon her shoulders, while a voice she knew well said close to her, "I hope you are satisfied now."

She turned with a shiver of surprise, having imagined that it was a servant who had handed her her cloak. Sir Louis was standing beside her, and under his moustache she could see the remains of the hard smile with which he had evidently spoken the words. This, then, was the crucial moment; there was nothing for it, she felt, but to put a brave face upon it.

"Yes, I am satisfied," she replied, looking him full in the face, despite the rush of colour to her own. "I knew you would do your duty."

He smiled again—that same joyless smile.

"Did you? Ah, well, that is something; but you won't forget, will you, that it was you who made me do it?"

Before she could find a reply privacy was at an end, and in five minutes more she was rolling homewards by her father's side, her head full of perturbing thoughts, born of a host of tiny observations made during the evening. What had he meant by his last words? Why did he smile so strangely and so joylessly? Was that the look of a man who had been married for barely six months to the first love of his life? And the matter had arranged itself so beautifully—so perfectly in accordance with justice and charity; surely it was not possible that this so carefully managed affair was going to turn out anything but a success.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TOWER ROOM.

On a warm day towards the middle of June, old Lady Hepburne was sitting as usual in her deep arm-chair beside the wide fireplace of Stonefield drawing-room, and as usual she was alternately crumpling up her cambric handkerchief into a ball and smoothing it out carefully with her long, brittle-looking fingers. But even in the midst of this occupation her eyes returned ever and again to the spot where her daughter-in-law, in a ravishing gown of creamy lace, was turning over the pages of a fashion-paper, and ever and again a smile of gentle satisfaction moved her pale, unsteady lips.

"Flo, my dear, would you mind letting down the blind a little further?" she presently said in her quavering tones.

"Certainly, mamma!" and the younger woman rose with alacrity and did as she was required.

At first it had been a little difficult to remember who was meant by "Flo"; but by this time she had got quite used to answering to the name of Sir Louis's first bride, whom, in the eyes of her mother-in-law, she impersonated. There had been no need for old Lady Hepburne to discover that any exchange of

persons had taken place, since her weakened intellect had unhesitatingly accepted Cordelia Farthingall as the original betrothed. It was Sir Louis himself who had begged his *fiancée* to fall in with this fancy of his mother's, in order to spare her unnecessary emotions, and Corrie had understood, and laughingly accepted the position.

"Why, it's the very name for me!" she had declared. "'Flo' makes you think of something small and light, doesn't it?—something like a pinch of dandelion fluff, and that is just what I am—suits me ever so much better than that pompous Cordelia, and doesn't suit *her* at all. It's a pity we can't exchange names out and out."

Just at first it had provoked her to see the start he used to give when the name fell from his mother's lips, or to note how he stammered and frowned when forced to address her so himself in the old lady's presence, in order to keep up the comedy; but that had been in the early days of their marriage, when passion still burnt high, and although it was but six months since, Louis's emotions had already lost most of their interest in her eyes.

On her way back from the window the sham Flo stopped beside the easy-chair and gave a little smoothing touch to the pillows, followed by a light kiss on the withered cheek. The two Lady Hepburnes got on splendidly together, for Corrie, in whose constitution there was no real unkindness, had been fitted out by nature with the small deft hands, the light touch, and the almost inaudible step of the ideal sick-nurse, and was always cheerfully ready to put these gifts at the disposal of her stricken mother-in-law, who, in her

turn, delighted in refreshing her old eyes by the sight of anything so young and gay, and so evidently brimful of life—the creature, moreover, who was Louis's wife, and who by-and-by would become the mother of other bearers of the name of Hepburne.

Corrie was still standing beside the big chair, when a servant entered to announce that a visitor had been shown into the Tower Room. Young Lady Hepburne followed the summons with alacrity, for, despite a real feeling of pity, these long *tête-à-têtes* with her mother-in-law were apt to pall.

The Tower Room played the part of boudoir to the mistress of Stonefield, and, for the sake of leaving the Dowager Lady Hepburne in undisturbed possession of her favourite big drawing-room, partly also of reception-room. It was a perfectly circular apartment, as round as the tower, whose walls were its walls, situated at a height most inconvenient to nineteenth-century ideas, but which was probably the only safe one to inhabit in, say, the thirteenth. The room was lighted by four narrow slits of windows, as picturesque as they were unconducive to the admission of light.

In the midst of this room, Florence Crossley was now standing, looking about her with reluctant yet curious eyes. She had been here once before, at the time of her engagement, when Louis had taken her over the castle and explained to her the improvements he meditated. But it was scarcely possible to identify the Tower Room as she had seen it then with the Tower Room which she saw now. Then, bare walls, rough with uncovered masonry, a naked floor, a few old pieces of clumsy oaken furniture; and now, all

satin and point lace, softly cushioned seats, and sumptuous carpets; every inch of wall draped with costly hangings, every table crowded with expensive nothings. Used though she was to comfort in every form, Florence looked about her almost awestruck, for the spot had been transformed into a very bower of luxury.

"He fulfils all her wishes, that is clear," she said within herself. "Nor does he attempt to correct her faults," she added, as her eye fell on a stray glove lying on one of the satin chairs. She looked further, and saw a music-book on the floor, a scarf on the piano, and a handful of loose papers among the flower-pots. Yes, that was her all over; Florence had seen just the corresponding symptoms in the little room in the school-house down there. Evidently Lady Hepburne had not acquired that sense of order which Miss Farthingall had so sorely lacked.

She was still standing on the same spot when her hostess entered.

"Oh, it is you!" exclaimed Lady Hepburne, with just a shade of disappointment in her voice; and then she evidently recollected herself, and came forward with outstretched hands.

"Won't you sit here? I think this chair is more comfortable. So sorry not to find you in last week!"

Florence sat down still unable to speak. She had seen Lady Hepburne once or twice since the dinner at Manseley, but this was the first time that they had been alone. All the remarks exchanged as yet had been exchanged in public, and had belonged to the conventional order. Would they remain so when made *en tête-à-tête?* The dread of its not being so

was what had caused Florence to postpone this unavoidable visit as long as social exigencies would allow of it.

At first it seemed as though her fears were unfounded. Lady Hepburne had scarcely sat down when she sprang up again and clapped her hands.

"Stop a minute; I forgot! We mustn't sit down until I have shown you all my pretty things. They are *very* pretty, I assure you, and a whole lot of them. Look at this bowl now—isn't it just *too* sweet? I made Louis give it to me for Christmas. And *have* you ever seen anything that beats this mirror-frame? Real ivory, mind you! No more shams for me now. And what do you say to this silver ash-tray? Did I tell you, by-the-by, that I've taken to cigarettes? Louis wanted to object, but I soon made him listen to reason. And don't you think this shade of blue satin suits my complexion exactly?"

She was moving about the room now, touching one object after another with caressing fingers, and chattering as gleefully as a child, and as utterly oblivious as any child could be of any possible cause of embarrassment between her and her visitor. Florence admired mechanically, as she was told to do, but in reality there was something about the look of the room which touched her disagreeably. It was not that each thing in itself was not excellent of its kind, but simply that there were too many of them in proportion to the square yards of space available. Despite her perfect taste in detail, Corrie had not been able to resist the temptation of crowding together as many beautiful objects as the room could be made to hold. Her excuse was that she had waited so long

for this moment. If ever since her childhood she had passionately coveted riches, it was not so much because she was afraid of poverty—which no one was calculated to combat more successfully than she—but because she loved luxury, and revelled in it with all her being.

Presently she turned and found Florence's eyes fixed upon her, and something in their expression seemed to make her realize the situation. In a moment she had found her cue.

"Do you know why I show you all this?" she asked, dropping her voice to a softer tone. "It is because you have a right to see it, since it is to *you* that I owe my happiness."

Her arms went round Florence's neck, while a quick little kiss brushed the other's cheek. Later on, Florence took herself to task for not having returned that friendly salute, but at the moment she could do nothing but stand there rigid, suffering the embrace without response, and feeling ungracious and uncomfortable, and somehow not at all touched by this show of affection.

"Tell me truly," Corrie was whispering confidentially; "have you got another yet?"

"I don't understand you," said Florence, coldly.

"Oh yes, you do! You must have seen crowds of nice men since last year. I have been daily expecting to hear of your engagement. Come, out with it!" she urged, charmingly audacious. "You've got another, haven't you?"

"No, I have not got another."

"Ah well, we'll hear about it presently, no doubt."

A few minutes more and they were seated at the tea-table, between them a dish of hot muffins, which Lady Hepburne was attacking with that wonderful appetite of hers, which seemed so strangely out of keeping with her ethereal appearance. And yet the appearance was not quite so ethereal as it was wont to be, so Florence told herself. Seen at close quarters and by broad daylight, there was no denying that Lady Hepburne's face and figure had undergone a change, slight but insignificant. In six months already, ease and high living had begun to coarsen the flower-like complexion and develop the sensual lines about the small, but well-accentuated mouth. She knew that it was so, yet could not resist the delights of indulgence; it was one more of those occasions on which reason and desire came into conflict.

"This is better than the school-house, isn't it?" asked Corrie, with her mouth full of hot muffin. She had dropped all show of emotion at sight of the tea-tray. "I like this room better than any in the castle, because it gives you such a jolly good view of the village, and especially of the school-house. I just love to stand there at the window and to look down upon the wretched place sprawling at my feet, and think that if ever I darken its doors again it can only be as patroness of a school-feast, and with a lace bonnet on my head. Oh, it's grand to be rich! Don't you think so?"

"It certainly has its advantages," said Florence, lamely.

She was waiting and watching for some word or sign to tell her that Lady Hepburne still loved her husband. It is true that she spoke a great deal of her

happiness, but with her this seemed to be synonymous with riches. She burnt to know, yet had no right to put the question now, even though it was she who had given this man to this woman.

They were still sitting *en tête-à-tête* when a step was heard on the winding stairs which connected the Tower Room with the rest of the house. Florence rose with a sudden sense of flurry.

"It's only Louis," said Lady Hepburne, serenely. "You don't mean to say that you mind meeting him?"

"Of course not," said Florence, remembering her *rôle*, and sitting down again abruptly.

Within the same instant Sir Louis was standing in the doorway. A slight movement which passed over his face was the only sign of emotion he gave at the sight of the visitor.

"Excuse me if I am in the way," he remarked, having bowed punctiliously to Florence. "I came to inquire about the new pony-carriage. Was it green or blue cloth which you said you preferred? The man has just written to inquire."

"Blue, of course! Don't you know that green would kill my complexion? And don't you know, too, that well-behaved husbands never forget any preference once expressed by their wives?"

"That's true," said Sir Louis, with more gravity than the occasion seemed to demand. "I suppose I am a wretch. It shall be any shade of blue you like. And what are your ideas about the harness? What do you say to silver mountings?"

Corrie clapped her hands. "Splendid! No, he's not a wretch, after all, is he, Florence?"

Florence smiled unsteadily, unable to speak.

"I have just had my duty explained to me, and am trying to come up to it. I am sure Miss Crossley agrees that it is the only choice open to me," and Sir Louis turned an expressionless face on the visitor.

"Of course," said Florence, hurriedly, and at that moment she caught sight of Lady Hepburne's eyes fixed on her with a look of good-natured amusement, and understood that she had overtaxed her strength. With a feeling as of suffocation, she rose once more to her feet and explained that she must be going.

"So *that's* why you haven't got another yet," was whispered into her ear at the moment of parting. "Poor girl, I'm so sorry for you! Never for a moment imagined you would keep him in your head such a time."

Under the circumstances a reply was impossible. With burning cheeks and quivering lips, Florence followed Sir Louis down the staircase, since he could do no less than show her to her carriage. Had she played her part so badly as all that? Was it possible that he, too, had seen through the feint of conventional friendliness? The mere thought of the danger gave her such a new and desperate courage, that presently she discovered that she was making the best small talk she had ever achieved. The improvements in the castle, the prospects of amusement for the summer, even the gossip of the neighbourhood, all was touched upon as she followed him down the narrow staircase, thanking God the while that he could not see her face.

"You seem in excellent spirits," remarked Sir Louis as he handed her to her seat.

He spoke quietly, but with that same hard smile she had noticed about him on the occasion of their first meeting. It was a new trick of his, that smile, coming at intervals with a sort of mechanical regularity; she did not remember seeing it in the days of their engagement.

"It is your wife that has infected me," laughed Florence, audaciously, for fear of breaking down. "It does one good to see any one as happy as she is."

"Virtuous people are always happy, are they not?" remarked Sir Louis, gravely. "I learnt that at school, so it must be true; besides, of course, I experience the same thing in myself. Good-bye, I hope you will have a pleasant drive."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TWO FLOS.

Once out of sight of the castle, Florence handed the reins to the groom, and leant back in her seat. As the excitement of the meeting subsided, she discovered that she had brought away with her from that first visit to Stonefield a feeling of unaccountable depression. Uncomfortable doubts were beginning to stir within her. She was aware of having sacrificed her happiness, and she wanted now to see the good results of that sacrifice, and as yet she had not been able to discover them.

Neither did the further meetings that followed bring her any nearer to her end. It was now only that she began to understand the former Miss Farthingall a little better. The necessity for constant effort being removed, Corrie no longer took the pains to keep up appearances as perfectly as formerly. Her passion for Louis had been a real passion, of its kind, but it had burnt itself out by this time, as did all her cravings, when once satisfied. Her hot-blooded, yet shallow nature was physically and morally incapable of remaining faithful to any one affection for any length of time. At the end of six months already Sir Louis had become to her only the unavoidable ap-

pendage to the wealth which she had so successfully manœuvred to secure, and already she knew that should she require new excitement, she would have to look for it elsewhere than in her husband.

Without guessing half of this, Florence yet understood that Lady Hepburne was not the woman whom, in her purity and trustfulness, she had taken her to be. Could this frivolous and obviously worldly creature be indeed the same person who had confided to her the story of an undying passion, only a year ago? She discovered all sorts of faults in Lady Hepburne which she had never noticed in Miss Farthingall. Slowly the suspicion took root within her that she did not truly love Louis, that she had never loved him—not in the sense in which Florence herself understood love—and that Louis himself was not happy in his marriage. He was a changed man altogether; in one year he had aged incredibly, not so much in appearance as in manner. He spoke and moved more slowly than formerly, and seemed to choose his words more deliberately, as a man does who knows that it is a necessity to keep a constant guard over himself. He still worked hard at the improvements of his house and estate, but he went at it now with a sort of dogged energy, very different from the boyish eagerness of other days. No, he was not happy. Florence had reached the point of recognizing this, though without being able to disentangle the nature of the mixed sensations which assailed her, for if it was torturing to watch his disappointment, was there not also a little hidden rapture in the thought that this might possibly mean that he had not forgotten her? It was a rapture in which it was impossible to indulge, and so deeply

mixed with pain that she could not tell the two apart.

Thus the summer slipped by, never having brought anything but the most conventional meetings in public, or the most commonplace remarks exchanged at the dinner-table or on the tennis-ground. Then there came an exquisite September day, a day with all the glow of summer in its sunshine, and all the keenness of autumn in its shadows, and this was the day that was destined to bring about a change in the attitude of the two actors who had been playing this comedy of indifference in each other's, and in the world's eyes all summer.

Lady Hepburne had assembled the whole neighbourhood in honour of her birthday—the first of her birthdays which had ever been celebrated with anything more solemn than a sponge-cake and a few pennyworths of lollipops. There was no denying that whatever Lady Hepburne had as yet done in the way of entertainment had been remarkably well done; therefore it was only natural that curiosity as to how she would manage a garden *fête* caused almost every invitation to be accepted, more especially as by this time, owing to the dexterity with which she had played her cards, all that people remembered of Corrie's antecedents was that she had been the daughter of a brilliant and distinguished officer. Florence, knowing that she could not absent herself without remark, had made a virtue of necessity. The gardens were full already when she arrived under the wing of a borrowed chaperon, and Lady Hepburne the centre of an obsequious group. There were two persons in the group whom Florence had never seen before—two

half-grown girls with large lemon-coloured freckles on their chins and about their temples, and who, by their movements, gave the impression of having put on their first long skirts that very morning.

"My quondam pupils," said Lady Hepburne, laughingly, by way of an introduction to Florence. The ex-governess never made the mistake of ignoring her former occupation, which was exactly the way of keeping people from talking about it. "You remember my talking to you of the Macallans, don't you, and my stay in Scotland?"

Florence put out her hand in silence. Was it likely that she should forget either the name or the circumstance?

"You can't imagine how glad they are to see their old governess again," went on Lady Hepburne, leaning back in her basket chair just enough to display the clocks of her silk stockings. "It just shows what a nice governess I must have been;" and she smiled round at the company generally, the male members of which hastened to agree with her.

"I've never had a pupil who wasn't glad to see me again. Now, if Cissy Carter were to turn up any day, I'm sure she'd just fly into my arms straight away."

"Shows her good taste," interpolated Lord Arlington, with a stare which, although broad, seemed to give no offence.

"And yet I wasn't with her more than six weeks —just during the voyage out, in fact. By the way, Maggie, what news have you of the Carters? I suppose they're still alive?"

Maggie murmured something about the Carters

meaning to come home next year, in order to fetch their son from college.

"Jim; yes, I remember him; he had rather a good shape of nose," said Lady Hepburne, reflectively.

Florence turned away. She didn't want to hear more either about the Macallans or their Australian friends; both these names were too much mixed up with painful memories to fall agreeably on her ears. And the spectacle of Lady Hepburne revelling in this fresh triumph—for to have confided to her care the very girls whose education in former years she had not been considered fit to conduct, was a very tangible triumph—somehow irritated her to-day, and made her fear for her self-possession.

An hour and more passed in quite a commonplace way, exactly as it should pass at a well-regulated garden-party. Lady Hepburne did the honours to perfection, limply assisted by Edith, whose look of abject humility served admirably to set off the security of the hostess.

It was getting late when Florence caught sight of Sir Louis taking his place on one of the tennis-grounds. It was the first glimpse she had had of him to-day, and immediately she knew what she had been waiting for. Her attentive cavalier had just gone off in search of a cup of tea, and, finding herself alone for the moment, she dared to let her eyes rest from afar on that tall form, whose splendid proportions were displayed to perfection by the thin flannel suit and the rapid movements of the game. So long she gazed that she forgot where she was, and started at last guiltily on feeling a hand laid lightly on her shoulder. Turning quickly, she found her hostess's

blue eyes watching her from under the flounce of a rose-coloured parasol.

"If you could have seen your face just now!" laughed Corrie, lightly, but not in the least unkindly. "Is it as bad as that? But never mind, my dear," she added, with a reassuring pat on the shoulder, "nobody else saw it, and I am not easily jealous."

Florence rose to her feet with an indignant reply on her lips; but at that moment Mr. Melton turned the corner close at hand with a tea-cup carefully balanced in his hand, and it became impossible to speak.

Lady Hepburne flitted away to another group; and, somehow or other, Florence, having presently managed to get rid of Mr. Melton, escaped alone to the more distant parts of the grounds. She felt that she could not trust herself to speak to any one else just yet. The weariness and distaste which had been upon her ever since she had caught sight of that central group on the lawn, had culminated in indignation at the frivolous words just uttered. Tired and excited, she was aware only of the desire to be alone.

Having gained the shelter of some shrubs, she relaxed her pace, and wandered on aimlessly, in search only of some private corner where she would not be immediately discovered. Presently her passage was stopped by a stone wall; but the door in it was not locked, and, with a sigh of relief, she closed it behind her, and found herself in a long strip of garden, sunk between high stone walls, on whose sun-baked surface the last of the peaches were ripening apace. It was hotter here than outside in the grounds; between these massive walls the autumn sunshine seemed to have

been caught as in a trap, and not to have found its way out again.

"Here I shall be alone," thought Florence, and at that moment she turned a corner, and saw close beside her a large cushioned chair on wheels, and seated in it a white-haired old lady with emaciated features, dozing in the sunshine. At the sound of Florence's step on the gravel she opened her eyes and stared about her vaguely.

Florence had stood still abruptly. She had never before seen the dowager Lady Hepburne, who always remained invisible to visitors; but, the first astonishment past, she understood immediately who this must be.

"You are his mother?" she said, without reflection.

"Yes, I am his mother," the other answered as readily. It did not seem to occur to her to ask who might be meant by "he." She gazed at Florence approvingly. "And who are you, my dear?" she asked with mild interest.

"I? Oh, I am only Flo—Flo Crossley, you know."

A cloud of bewilderment descended on to the white face. The long fingers began to play nervously with the handkerchief.

"But that cannot be," she said gently; "because Flo Crossley married my son."

"No, no!" cried Florence, starting as though she had been stung. From Louis himself she knew that his mother's intellect was weakened; but Lady Hepburne, basking peacefully in the sunshine, with her lace cap on her head and her handkerchief in her

hand, looked so stately and so venerable that, even if Florence had been calm enough to reflect, it would have been hard to realize any deficiency of faculties.

"No, no; he did not marry her!"

The bewilderment on Lady Hepburne's face increased.

"I know of only one Flo," she repeated in a tone of distress, "and she is married to my boy."

It was Florence's turn to be puzzled.

"But she is not called Flo," she began; then, as a light broke in upon her, "Has she taken my name?" she cried, overcome by a sudden wave of anger. "Since she has taken everything else, she might have left me my name, at least. Oh, this is crueller than all the rest!"

The old lady looked at Florence's flashing eyes, and suddenly her own were illuminated by a passing gleam of understanding. She bent towards the excited girl.

"Are you fond of him?" she asked softly.

"Yes, God forgive me, I am! I love him more than my life, and have loved him so ever since I first knew him; and *I* am Flo, the real Flo, whom he was to have married, and who loves him much—much better than that other one does!"

She was kneeling on the gravel now and passionately pressing one of Lady Hepburne's thin hands to her wet eyes. If she had ever known her mother, it is possible that she might have been able to resist the temptation of unburdening herself in this minute; but the thought that this was *his* mother, who ought to have been her own too, was not to be resisted.

Florence was still kneeling beside the chair, and

no further word had been spoken, when the sound of the garden gate falling to made her throw a startled glance over her shoulder. Sir Louis, with his tennis-racket in his hand, was coming up the same walk by which she had approached, with the intention no doubt of looking after his mother.

Florence rose hastily to her feet; in her present state of emotion she felt it impossible to face him. Without looking back again she hurried away in the opposite direction.

Sir Louis's eyes followed her with a look of astonishment. Even as he stopped beside his mother's chair she had not entirely disappeared. When the last gleam of her dress had vanished, his eyes came back to his mother's face questioningly. But it was she who spoke first.

"Tell me, Louis," she began tremulously, "are there two Flo's, or only one? I can't understand it at all."

"What do you mean?" he asked very low. "why do you ask?"

"Because there was some one here who called herself Flo, and who said that she loves you better than her life and has always loved you so, and I don't understand who she is."

"She said that?" asked Sir Louis, catching hold of his mother's hand with a grip of whose vigour he was not at all aware.

"Yes, she said that, and also that some one else had taken everything from her—even her name," repeated the invalid, mechanically. The gleam of intelligence had long since died out of her eyes; her poor sick spirit was weary of the subject. "And she

was crying as she said it—there! My hand is still wet with her tears," she added fretfully. "Let go my hand, Louis, that I may wipe them off! Let go, please! You are hurting me, Louis!"

Instead of letting go, Sir Louis carried the feeble fingers impulsively to his lips and kissed them eagerly —almost greedily.

"Oh, thank you, mother!" he murmured, his breath cut short by the violence of the emotion which had seized him. "You don't know what good news you have given me. Thank you, my own sweet mother, thank you a thousand times!"

In the next moment she was sitting once more alone, blinking her eyes in the autumn sunshine as she looked after the retreating figure of her son, understanding nothing at all, and trying to puzzle out in her poor weakened brain what it was that she was being thanked for.

Sir Louis had gone but a few steps when the wild elation on his face went out with the suddenness of a candle extinguished. He stood still, gnawing his lip and frowning at the gravel. He had only just realized that he was hurrying after Florence; that at the rate at which he was walking he must infallibly overtake her before she had reached the end of the garden. And then?

"Fool!" he said aloud, striking his forehead with the palm of his hand. "What am I rejoicing for? I was nearly forgetting that there is another Flo!"

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE TOY HAVEN.

Next day, at about the same hour at which she had entered the Stonefield garden, Florence was walking along by the river, on her way back from the village. It was not the shortest way home, but in this wilderness of willow bushes, interspersed with spots of greensward and of silver-white sand, there was something particularly soothing to a troubled spirit, and Florence's spirit was troubled to-day, for she could not forgive herself yesterday's want of self-control. It had been in order to banish the reproaches that pursued her that she had bethought herself this afternoon of some of those village *protégés* who since her return from Nice had somehow come to be a tiny bit neglected. But the expedition, instead of bringing relief, had brought fresh irritation. The couple whom she had married last year had not only quarrelled, but separated; and Tom Leake's nephews were turning out a regular plague to the household, and were on the point of being turned into the street by their enraged adoptive father. As Florence made her way slowly and listlessly between the willow bushes, she was asking herself whether it might not be better after all to let people manage their own affairs for

themselves. A profound discouragement was upon her, a feeling to which her vigorous nature very rarely yielded.

Presently she reached the turn of the path which would take her home, but, instead of following it any further, she set her face towards the river. There was a spot in her mind which she meant to reach, a sheltered nook where the water, cutting sharply inland, made a bay among the bushes, fringed with long grasses and paved with the finest, whitest sand. In former days this hidden spot had played a more important part in her eyes than now, for it was here that she had often and often come with her nurse to sail her paper boats upon this very ideal of a toy haven, or to dig with her wooden spade in the beautiful, glistening sand. Yet even after the age of paper boats was passed, this corner where the willow branches met overhead, and where the water lapped gently against the shore, had retained a certain favour in her eyes. She loved to come here on still evenings and to sit and think of nothing in particular upon one of the old willow stems which the spring floods had uprooted. It was a haunt which she had betrayed to no one, except indeed to Louis, during the time of their short engagement.

To-day was the very day for the toy haven. There was not a breath of wind stirring, and for sound only the occasional flutter of a yellow willow leaf, as it sank slowly to the ground. A little while ago she had heard other sounds, that of distant shots resounding sharp and crisp through the clear September air, and she had remembered that the neighbouring covers were being beaten to-day; but the sounds had died away even before she had left the path.

There was no distinct track to follow; but, knowing as she did every bush by sight, she found the place without difficulty. Parting the supple branches, she stepped out on to the shore of the river, and immediately found herself face to face with Sir Louis Hepburne.

He was in shooting clothes, and had laid his gun beside him on the sand, while, with his arm resting on the crooked branch beside him, he stood in the attitude of one who is waiting, and who has possibly been waiting for some time.

Her first impulse was one of unreasoning terror, but as she turned to fly he barred her passage with one step.

"No," he said, in so masterful a manner that, despite her high spirit, she inwardly quailed, "you must not go yet; you have first got to stop and listen to what I have to say."

His hand was on her arm; she could feel the grip of his fingers through the light woollen stuff of her sleeve. By the tone of his voice she knew that it would be useless to resist. There was an old willow trunk beside her, with its roots in the air, yet still green and alive, after the dauntless manner of the willow. She moved towards it, for she understood that something terrible was coming, and she felt that she was trembling. Unconsciously bowing her head, as though in submission, she sank down upon the rough seat and waited for his next words.

"It is a good thing that you thought of coming here to-day," he began, after a moment of painful suspense on her part, "for it was absolutely necessary that we should meet. If the occasion had not made

itself, I should have had to make it. I saw you leave the village, and I watched you from afar. When you left the path I guessed where you were going, and I took my direction, for I meant to be here before you. You have chosen the spot well; nobody will disturb us here." He laughed so disagreeably that she glanced up in sudden fear.

"Don't be afraid," he said roughly. "I am not going to make love to you; I am not in the humour for that. You will hear no pretty speeches from me to-day. I have tracked you here only to tell you that I have made a discovery. Are you curious? Well, I have discovered—never mind how—that you love me, and that you loved me at the time when you broke your engagement to me. Can you look me in the face and deny that it is so?"

Instead of looking him in the face she cowered away before him, letting her head sink a little lower on her breast.

"Speak!" he said imperiously. "Do you deny it?"

"I do not deny it," she said, just audibly. "I told you at the time that I—still cared for you, and that it was only a sense of duty which prompted me to act. Don't you remember?"

He ground the heel of his heavy boot into the sand at his feet.

"Yes, I remember; but I thought you were lying. I know better now—unluckily for us both, and it is because I know better that I have come here to-day to accuse you of having spoilt my life."

"Are you unhappy?" The words were over her lips before she was aware of the thought.

He went on without heeding.

"So long as I could suppose that you were tired of me I could have forgiven you, for that would have been a mere want of constancy, and no one can govern their affections; but now that I know that it was not so, that it was because of one of your wild, crooked notions of duty that you threw me over, I cannot forgive you—no, and I never shall. What right had you—what right?" he repeated, and the false calm of his manner suddenly gave way. "Your own happiness was your own to throw to the winds, if you liked, but what God in heaven or on earth could give you the right to sacrifice my happiness as well? A sense of duty, indeed! Ha, ha!" and he laughed loudly and harshly. "Do you want to know what your sense of duty has brought me to? Have you a notion of the fearful responsibility you took upon yourself that day in the Long Walk? Do you understand what it means to spoil a man's life? Listen, and I will tell you. It is the last time that we shall ever talk anything but commonplaces, therefore everything that has to be said must be said to-day."

Then in a few abrupt phrases, and with a pitiless plainness that knew no regard either for himself or for others, he gave her the history of his engagement.

"When I found myself bound to her,"—thus presently ran the dryly given narrative—"I did all that a man can do to revive my former fancy for her, or at least to find satisfaction in her apparent passion for me. This helped to tide me over the engagement, and by the time I was surfeited by her obtrusive affection it was too late to go back—I was a married man. I had been fool enough to believe that she loved me,

but that blindness was short. No danger of her affection bothering me now. My life and her life are two things apart; and what mine is I dare not tell you, even at this moment—what it may yet become I dare not think within my own soul. The woman who should be my helpmate stands in my way at every turn. But I do not blame her, I blame you. It is not at her door that I lay the ruin of my life, it is at yours. You are a good woman, and she is a bad one, and yet you have done me more harm than she has. She is nothing worse than a successful adventuress. She has only done what she could to secure a good berth, while you have deliberately taken my heart in your hands and crushed it out of a pure caprice. She has got what she wanted, but only because you drove me from you. My blindness may have been at fault, her cunning, many chance circumstances, but none of them would have had any power if you had been true; it was none of these, it was you alone who hounded me into this most unhappy marriage. Are you satisfied with your work, Miss Providence?"

With white and quivering lips Florence sat listening to each word as it fell. Much of what he said seemed but the echo of those doubts which had haunted her all summer, but the fierce bitterness of their expression took away her breath. Her heart was bleeding within her; and yet, although alarm at her own work was blanching her cheeks, and although inwardly quailing at the passion in his manner, she would not have been Florence if she had yielded all at once. No doubt she had acted rashly—it was impossible not to recognize this; yet even in this moment of supreme anguish something within her re-

belled. It was in the very excess of the reproaches flung at her, in their very bitterness and harshness that she found the strength to attempt a last defence.

"How can I be satisfied," she asked, forcing back the tears that stung her eyelids, and would have made her voice unsteady, "since it has turned out so badly? I suppose I was imprudent, that I ought to have made more inquiries. But, at the time, I seemed to be acting rightly; her name was compromised through you; it was your duty——"

She stopped short, frightened by the look on his face.

"That word again! Do you still dare to pronounce it to my face? Are you not afraid of tempting me beyond all bounds?"

"I could not have married you with that woman standing between us," she managed to say, though she was trembling. In her eyes there shone the last gleam of that old obstinacy which had been her undoing. "But oh, my God!" burst from her in the same breath, "I would give half my life if she had never been born!"

She fell forward with her face in her hands. The tears had come now, despite all resistance, and were pouring hot and thick from between her fingers.

He watched her in stony silence, not moving a muscle of his face. He was not afraid of watching her, knowing well that there was no danger of his being softened by the sight of her tears, for in what he felt just now anger was too busy to leave any part to tenderness. At this moment what he saw in her was not the woman he loved, but the wilful destroyer

of his happiness. If to watch her weep awoke any emotion within him, it was one of grim satisfaction.

"You wanted to know what it feels like to be unhappy, did you not?" he asked, as her sobs slowly subsided. "Well, you can have your wish now!"

It was a cruel word and cruelly said. His whole manner and bearing and even a certain sharpness in the tone of his voice was that of a man who has been tried beyond endurance, whose rebellious soul is consumed by inward rage, whose whole nature stands in danger of being warped by the crookedness of circumstances.

Without lifting her head, she wept on in silence. The hidden spot began to be crossed and recrossed by the level beams of the sinking sun, which was laying bars of gold on the white sand and warming the grey old willow trunks into momentary ruddiness. On the surface of the toy haven a yellow leaf sailed placidly, sole successor of the paper boats of other days.

"What are you crying about?" he asked with dawning impatience when another long minute had passed. "You wanted it so. God had given us a true and pure love, that rarest and best of gifts which he gives to men and women; the world had showered upon us all we could need for our welfare, but you wanted to be wiser than the world, wiser than the real Providence above, so you flung the gift from yourself, and stole it from me."

He drew a long breath, passing his hand across his forehead, then he stooped for his gun.

"You know all now; I am going. Do not be afraid of further reproaches. It was necessary that you should hear this, but now I am done. It is time

to put on the mask again. I told you once that we must be either lovers or strangers. You have elected that we should be strangers, and so it shall be. Good-bye, Florence. Why are you crying still? Is it because you love me? I think it is, but I do not thank you for that love. If I had never known you, I might have been happy."

Long after he had left her, Florence sat bowed upon the willow stem, broken in soul and body. It was a much bitterer moment than when he had left her in the Long Walk, a year and more ago, for then she had still believed that she was doing something good and great, while now it was coming to her slowly that she had only succeeded in doing something that was both small and foolish.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CARTERS.

A GOLDEN June day, coming after a wet June week, which means no dust, and yet no draggled skirts, and far more smiling faces than cross ones to be met with in the streets. It is only the deadsick or the incurably melancholy who can manage to look morose to-day; every ordinary person's good humour is celebrating its resurrection after a week of burial behind dripping umbrellas and streaming window-panes.

It was the first day on which London appeared supportable to Florence. When in the spring it had been decided, not exactly *by* her father, but *for* him—for on these occasions there are never wanting troops of elderly lady friends with bagfuls of good advice, calculated to regulate the steps of a helpless widower—that it was more than high time for her to put in an appearance in London, Florence had offered as little resistance as had done her suffering, but gently resigned, parent. There was even a certain prospect of relief in the plan. It was awkward to be continually thrown together with the two eligible *partis* who, during the past winter had openly aspired to her hand, and both of whom she had summarily dismissed, to

the indignation of the county. But there was another much stronger ground for desiring a change of scene, for if she *did* meet Louis in London, it would be in a crowd, where he would not be forced to see her, nor she him.

Since that day in September they had never again spoken in private, and each meeting in public had been to her a moment of torture. Looked at in the light of that confession made by the riverside, it was only too easy to read aright every gesture and every glance. This hardened, bitter man was her buoyant, eager Louis of other days, and it was she who had made him into this. And yet there was nothing for it now but to stand aside and watch the gulf widening between husband and wife, and mark every symptom which proclaimed their absolute unsuitableness to each other. And through it all she knew that he still loved her. He had not, indeed, told her so on that terrible day of reckoning, but despite what had looked almost like hatred in his glance, her woman's instinct had read the truth. She understood that nothing but a fiercely disappointed love could have made him so merciless. Yet the thought was too full of the agony of a wasted happiness to leave any room for rejoicing.

To London, therefore, she had come, hoping that the rattle and clash of society would over-scream that small, persistent voice within her, which cried out without stopping for that which it had wasted and wanted back again. And London had received her with a lowering brow and a dark, tear-stained face, which seemed to promise no lightening of the burden.

But to-day, to-day, at last, the sun was shining,

and Florence, being young, in spite of her sorrow, and healthy, despite the past period of delicacy, began to hope for better things.

As she sat deeply ensconced in an easy-chair she had a half-cut novel on her knee, yet her thoughts were busy, not with the book, but with the dinner-party to which she had been last night. She had made an acquaintance there of whom she had been thinking almost ever since. At the very moment of entering the room her eyes had fallen on a large, plain woman, whose striking resemblance to Louis had sent a dart of pain through her heart. A few minutes later she had been presented to Mrs. Ripon, and had recognized the name of Sir Louis's married sister.

She could not say whether it was the strong resemblance or whether it was something in the large and somewhat hard features, and the straightforward, abrupt manner which had attracted her, but from the moment of shaking hands she had felt that she would like this woman for a friend—and, strangely enough, it almost seemed as though the liking were mutual. Strange, indeed! for why should Mrs. Ripon feel any good will towards the girl who had jilted her brother?

As Florence sat quite still with her book on her knee, she was wondering how soon she would see Mrs. Ripon again. To have Louis's sister for her friend! there was something thrilling and yet almost alarming in the thought. With Edith she had never managed to get on; such an excess of humility and submission was too contrary to Florence's own temper not to act as an irritant. "I feel tempted sometimes to stick pins into her," she had on one occasion confided to the

vicar, "just in order to see whether she has bones or not, or is nothing but soft, yielding flesh!"

It was even hard to realize that this limp, white-skinned creature was Louis's sister, whereas Mrs. Ripon bore the relationship written on her face.

"I wonder if she has thought of me since yesterday," mused Florence. "Perhaps I only imagined that she liked me. She'll be full of engagements, of course."

"Mrs. Ripon!" announced a footman, flinging open the door.

Florence sprang to her feet, while the novel dropped unheeded to the floor. This so prompt answer to her thoughts had a semi-stupefying effect. It was Mrs. Ripon who began to talk, and who also picked up the novel.

"Mercy, child! you *do* look scared. Have I frightened you? What were you thinking of when I came in?"

"I was thinking of you," stammered Florence.

Her new friend gave her a keener look. "And when one talks of the wolf—or, perhaps, only thinks of him—one is apt to see his tail, you know."

She took hold of Florence's two hands, and looked her in the eyes.

"Of course I know that I ought to hate you by rights—but somehow I don't; and, therefore, I propose that you should come with me for a turn in the park. It's a dream of a day, and I've scarcely had a breath of air for a week; and I'm sure you haven't either. Will you come?"

"Of course I will!" said Florence, flushing with pleasure.

Her heart beat high as she looked into the face of her new friend, and yet it was by no means a beautiful face to look at. Those same materials—the massive forehead, large nose, and square chin—which went to make up the face of a handsome man, had resulted here in a distinctly plain woman, but one in whose physiognomy force was paired with a certain sympathetic warmth which just saved her from deserving the epithet of "masculine." The likeness to Louis was bewildering. It was a strangely exciting sensation to see those same brown eyes, which for two years past had never looked at her otherwise than with scorn and reproach, now gazing at her with kindly goodwill; and it made her heart foolishly rejoice to be smiled at by that same somewhat broad mouth with the large, even white teeth, which nowadays never smiled at all.

Ten minutes later, Florence and Mrs. Ripon were rolling over the pavement side by side, in a peculiarly comfortable victoria.

After all, London was not so bad, thought Florence, as she watched the first really light dresses of the season fluttering along the pavement under the branches of the vivid green trees, which stretched their arms over the park railing, and had luckily not had time to get dusty.

"By-the-by," remarked Mrs. Ripon, presently, "Before we turn into the park, I must positively look in on the Carters. I hope you don't mind?"

"Oh, no. Why should I? But who are the Carters?"

It seemed to Florence that she had heard the name before, although she could not have said where.

"They're those Australian acquaintances of the Macallans—our cousins, you know. They were kind to Archie Macallan, while he was making his world-tour, some half-dozen years ago—Melbourne business people, I believe. They came home last month to fetch their eldest son from college; and yesterday I had a letter from Annie Macallan, begging me to look them up. It won't be more than a mere look, though, for they're packing up for the journey. Here we are. Will you come up with me, or stay in the carriage?"

"I will come up with you," said Florence, some sudden impulse of curiosity seizing her.

She thought she would rather like to see the people with whom the former Miss Farthingall had sailed for Australia.

The hotel sitting-room, into which the two ladies were ushered, bore on it the stamp of impending departure in an even higher degree than is usually the case on such occasions. Open boxes, gaping provision-baskets, plaid straps, brown paper and twine—as well as the usual unavoidable supply of parcels that have arrived in a heap at the eleventh hour—usurped the furniture so completely that it was with some difficulty that a sofa could be cleared for the visitors. Fortunately, neither Mrs. nor Miss Carter, the only members of the family present, appeared in the least flurried by the intrusion. As Florence entered in the wake of her chaperon, the first thing she caught sight of was a handsome tom-boy of a girl, with short brown curls tumbling about her eyes and the most brilliant complexion she had ever seen, kneeling on a trunk which a maid was making frantic efforts to lock. It was

from the top of the trunk that she acknowledged the presence of the visitors by a friendly nod, and it was not until the rebellious lock had yielded that she descended from her elevation, and immediately took possession of Florence. By this time, the introductions and explanations were over, and Mrs. Carter—who had evidently, in her day, been quite as tom-boyish as her daughter, and was still almost as handsome, with the same brilliant complexion, only coarsened by age, the same brown locks, only mixed with grey, the same substantial figure and somewhat haphazard manners—was talking volubly and vigorously to Mrs. Ripon. Florence was rather glad when the brown-haired girl swooped down upon her, for the talk all turned round the name of Macallan, a theme in which she was unable to take part.

"Come along; we'll be ever so much jollier over there by ourselves!"

It was thus Florence heard herself addressed, and, finding Cissy Carter's lively black eyes fixed upon her, she rose with an amused smile on her lips to follow the invitation.

"It's the Macallans now and Scotland," confidentially explained Cissy, as she led the way across the big room, "but presently it'll be Jim and his studies, and his masters, and his scrapes, and his virtues, and I've had just about enough of that this last week. One can be jolly fond of one's brother, you know, without caring to have him dished up seventeen times a day. You just sit down there and tell me a little about London, and how many balls you've been to, and what frocks you wore. I'm in love with London, you know, and it's just maddening to have to go

off to-morrow without having seen anything but the streets. Now, please begin. Don't think I'm not listening because I'm moving about; but you see our hours are numbered, and there are millions of things to pack. Just look at those books, and all these photos! Mother never will move anywhere without her photos; she says it gives her a feeling of having her friends about her. Now about the balls. Did you say five or six?"

"I did not say anything at all," laughed Florence; "but I have only been to one ball so far, and I didn't even find it amusing. Let me help you with those photos; you are going to let them drop—there!"

It was too late to do anything but assist in the picking up. The first photograph which chanced to come into Florence's hand as she stooped towards the floor was a family group of the Macallans, one which she had seen at Stonefield; the second and third were unknown to her; but the fourth again seemed familiar—a slender figure in a white muslin dress. She took it up again to look at it more closely.

"Why, that is Lady Hepburne!" she said quickly.

Cissy, still crouching on the floor, looked up.

"That? Oh no; that is Mrs. Wax, the widow—the one who used to be Miss Farthingall."

"Of course she used to be Miss Farthingall, but she is Lady Hepburne now."

"Perhaps we're not talking of the same person. I mean the Miss Farthingall who used to be my governess."

"And so do I. A small, fair-haired person—in fact, just the person on this photograph."

"That's her exactly."

"Then why do you call her Mrs.—what?"

"Wax. Why do *you* call her Lady Hepburne?"

"Please answer my question first."

"I call her Mrs. Wax because she married a man called Wax. A pretty good reason, surely?"

Florence sat with the photograph in her hand, staring at Cissy Carter with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"I don't understand. It can't be the same."

"Oh yes, it can. It was when we left her behind us at Sydney. We'd had small-pox on board, you know, and Miss Farthingall caught it, so on landing we just handed her over to the hospital. We were quite sorry to leave her that way, but father had business waiting for him at Melbourne, and besides, of course, we couldn't risk infecting ourselves. It's a case where people just have to look after themselves," chattered on Cissy, with robustly naïve heartlessness, as her brilliant red lips smiled radiantly at Florence, and her strong brown hands busily collected the scattered photographs. "Ain't I right?"

"Yes, yes; please go on with your story!"

"Well, we told her that she might follow us in case she got well, but she never turned up, and we quite thought she was dead, until one day, about a year later, we suddenly had a glimpse of her in the street, dressed in the most bewitching widow's weeds you can imagine. This made us curious, of course, and mother began to inquire, and somehow we found out that this man Wax, who had been making eyes at Miss Farthingall during all the passage out, had tracked her to the hospital and beleaguered her there.

He gave himself out for something much bigger than he was, for he was really only a clerk in one of the Melbourne banks, and a regular bad lot into the bargain, who had either forged or cheated, or done something or other; but, luckily for her, he got smashed up in the big railway accident above N——, only a few months after the marriage, and before the police had managed to get hold of him."

"And she was in mourning for him?" asked Florence, still in wonder.

"Naturally, since she was his widow. We didn't come across her again after that sight in the street, and I never thought I should hear of her again, until you spotted the photograph just now."

"I don't believe it!" said Florence, with an abrupt shake of her head, as she threw the picture on the table.

"What do you not believe? Is there anything so out of the way in a governess marrying a clerk? But it's my turn now. I'm just dying to know what you mean by calling her Lady Hepburne. You don't mean to say——"

"She was married to Sir Louis Hepburne a year ago last December," said Florence, quietly.

"To Sir Louis Hepburne? That grand cousin of the Macallans, with all that lot of money?"

"Yes, he is a cousin of the Macallans."

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Cissy, sinking on to her heels in the excess of her astonishment. "What tremendous luck! The small-pox can't have left any marks, anyway. Sir Louis Hepburne! Her second haul was a better one by long chalks than her first. I rather wonder the Macallans never mentioned it in

their letters; but perhaps they weren't exactly proud of the match. My eye, what a rise! And from such a start! You know that her mother was an actress, don't you?"

"An actress?"

This was a fresh bewilderment. Florence had only known that Miss Farthingall was the daughter of a distinguished officer, and that her widowed mother had lived in London. She had thought of her always as having been a highly respectable, but stern-principled old lady, whose heart had been well-nigh broken by that early slur on her daughter's name, whose life even had possibly been cut short by this sorrow. Corrie had gone into no details while speaking of her mother, but it was in this way only that her figure fitted into the narrative, which had had so fatal an effect upon Florence's imagination. And now another blow had been dealt to the picture. As she sat vaguely listening to the *aperçu* of the Farthingall family, which Cissy Carter was pouring into her ears, Florence felt that, one after another, all her theories were being upset.

"I ask you whether she isn't just in luck!" concluded Cissy, triumphantly. "Mother, just listen to what I've been hearing about Miss Farthingall!" And she veered round towards the other group.

"Not now, please, not now!" said Florence, quickly; and in a sudden fit of fear she caught the other by the sleeve. "Mrs. Ripon is his sister, you know, and she mightn't like to hear—all this story, just in this way."

Fortunately, Mrs. Carter, talking at the top of her

very robust voice, had not noted the equally robust interruption.

Cissy opened her eyes. "What story would she not like to hear? Do you mean that they don't know about the swindling business? I dare say she left out that part when she told her story. I'm just bursting to tell mother the news, but I'll wait till you're gone, if you like. By-the-by, is she in London? I'd like to have a look at her in her new shape. She wasn't nearly such a bad lot, now that I come to think of it."

"She's coming up the day after to-morrow, I believe."

Cissy made a face. "Too late for me! I'll be far on the briny by that time. But you might give her my love; there's no harm in being on good terms with Lady Hepburne."

The door was scarcely yet well closed behind the visitors, when already Cissy had shouted at her mother the pith of the news just received, whereupon the elderly tom-boy shouted back her incredulity and astonishment at the younger one, after which there followed a dialogue of such volubility and vigour that any one passing down the passage would have taken the room to be occupied, not by two, but by at least a round half-dozen of people. Either because of the over-great robustness of their lungs, or from the fear of being interrupted in their speech, both Mrs. and Miss Carter had asquired the habit of pitching their voices in that tone which is generally only used in addressing the deaf.

"To think of my having had a governess who has turned into a baronet's wife!" exclaimed Cissy,

ecstatically, when the first excitement had been weathered.

"It'll be something to talk about at Melbourne," remarked Mrs. Carter, as she once more attacked the packing. "If there are any more Waxes alive they'll not be slow to make a show of the relationship now."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. WAX.

During the remainder of the drive, Florence somewhat astonished Mrs. Ripon by her sudden taciturnity. She had seemed to enjoy the idea of the park, but although all London apparently had turned out to-day and the drive was in all its glory, nothing seemed especially to attract her attention; and Mrs. Ripon, having spoken to her twice without getting an answer, concluded within herself that the girl was tired, and promptly took her home.

At the moment of parting, Florence seemed suddenly to wake up.

"Is it quite certain that your brother and his wife are coming to town the day after to-morrow?" she asked abruptly.

"That is what is settled; but if you wish it I can let you know when they come."

"Yes, please do," said Florence, with an eagerness which sent Mrs. Ripon away puzzled.

The two days that followed included a ball, two dinner-parties, and a dozen or so of calls, but although bodily present at these functions, there was a certain indifference about Florence's manner, and a certain vagueness in her glance, which seemed to imply that

the spirit was absent. Her thoughts had got into hopeless disorder, and, during these days, she was waiting for something which would help her to range them once more, but that could not be until the Hepburnes were in London. She only gave them one night after their arrival. Her impatience would brook no further delay. At about eleven o'clock in the morning her card was taken up to Lady Hepburne, and the answer came back that her ladyship was not yet visible. There was nothing for it but to come again in the afternoon. To wait another night was out of the question.

This time her ladyship was not only visible, but was radiantly dispensing tea to some half-dozen visitors, in a ravishing combination of lace and washing-silk. This was her first whole day in London, and all the rapture of entering on this new phase of her new existence was written broadly in her dancing eyes and round about her smiling lips. It was the pinnacle of bliss which she was beginning to touch, and each one of the visitors present lifted her an inch higher towards it. There was a very old gentleman there with white eyebrows and a snub-nose which struck your attention unduly, and somehow looked incongruous and out of place, perhaps because we are more accustomed to see old noses point downwards than upwards; and there was also a very young man who chiefly conveyed the impression of being most beautifully washed, not merely clean in the ordinary, everyday way in which every decent Englishman is clean, but ostentatiously, almost aggressively so, his broad, boyish countenance seeming to shine with the vigour of past scrubbings, each separate yellow hair to be still damp from the morning

ablutions, while about his whole youthful person there hovered the faint and not disagreeable odour of soap and water. Then there was a man with a grin, whose eyes disappeared when he smiled—and he smiled at almost everything that was said—while his teeth became abruptly disclosed, and a woman with half a flower-garden on her head, and one or two other people too unremarkable to note. Edith Hepburne was there too, heavily assisting her sister-in-law in the dispensing of the tea, and followed closely wherever she moved by the well-washed young man, Mr. Ruckton by name, as Florence subsequently learnt.

This was almost as bad as not finding Lady Hepburne at home, she reflected in dismay.

"But I don't care!" she added to herself with innate doggedness, "I'll outstay them all."

But it was not so easily done. During the half-hour that followed, a couple more men dropped in, the water in the silver kettle was renewed, and the moment she longed for, yet dreaded, seemed further off than ever. Tongues were moving all around her, but Florence was still too much of a provincial to have caught the proper tone of conversation, perhaps also possessed too little aptitude for the task, yet, though she felt decidedly out of it, she sat on patiently, wondering a little at the address with which Lady Hepburne kept the ball agoing, and waiting for the opportunity which she knew would not escape her, while more than one curious glance was thrown towards the silent, grey-eyed girl whose strangely concentrated expression seemed so entirely out of keeping with her surroundings.

It was a relief when the old gentleman with the

snub-nose looked at his watch and hurriedly rose. His movement seemed to rouse some others to the memory of further engagements. At the end of another quarter of an hour, besides herself, there were only the lady with the flowery hat and the well-washed young man remaining. She could see that Lady Hepburne was beginning to grow restless, and once or twice she had caught her hostess's eyes upon herself, as though astonished at seeing her still there. Probably she too had an engagement waiting for her.

"Never mind, it must just wait," thought Florence, grimly.

At last the miniature flower-garden sailed out by the door, and Corrie rose with a sigh of relief. At so unmistakable a hint, Mr. Ruckton blushed guiltily and grouped for his hat. The interest of his conversation with Edith Hepburne had evidently made him oblivious to his surroundings.

"And you?" said Corrie, as the door closed behind the second-last visitor, and she turned with one of her charmingly impertinent smiles towards Florence—a smile which said quite plainly—

"Are *you* going to spend the night here?"

Florence had not yet moved from her place. Her eyes followed Edith Hepburne, who was moving towards a further door, intent, apparently, on effacing herself, after her usual fashion.

"I am going too, as soon as I have given you a message I have for you."

"Can't you give it to me to-morrow? There is a frock upstairs waiting to be tried on. I told you, didn't I, that we are going to Lady Langbury's ball

to-night?—and *such* a frock! Imagine a sort of pale green froth all covered with——"

Florence's eyes came back from the distant door. Edith was gone.

"No; I can't give it to you to-morrow. I have waited long enough; it must be now. I have seen your old pupil, Cissy Carter, and she asked me to give you her love."

"Is that all? Charmed to get it of course, but I can't see where the hurry comes in."

"But that is not all. Cissy Carter told me something else, and I came here to ask if it is true."

She drew a deep breath, and fixed her grey eyes full on Lady Hepburne. As Corrie met the gaze, a vague alarm crossed her mind. At last her attention was struck by the other's manner. Evidently something more was coming, but what could it be? Until now she had been standing, as though to mark more plainly that the interview was only a passing one. Now she sat down, and asked more quietly, while carefully watching Florence—

"Well, what other message did she give you?"

"It was not a message; it was a story she told me. She says that you were married in Australia, and left a widow soon afterwards!"

It seemed to Florence that Lady Hepburne's complexion changed a little; but, nevertheless, after a just perceptible pause, she burst out laughing, perhaps a trifle too loudly.

"Married in Australia! Why, that sounds like a fairy-tale almost! Where on earth has Cissy got hold of this cock-and-bull story? And do you mean to say you believe her?"

"Married to a man called Wax," went on Florence, unmoved, "who was a clerk in a Melbourne bank, and who was killed within the same year by a railway accident."

Lady Hepburne was still laughing, but not from the bottom of her heart, as any keen observer could have plainly seen. There are moments when a show of merriment is an excellent method for gaining time, and while Corrie was pretending to be shaken by hilarity, she was in reality rapidly reviewing the situation, and asking herself what tack she had better take. This turn of events was unexpected. She had not even supposed that the Carters had ever traced her, after the parting in the harbour-town; yet Florence's words convinced her that they had done so successfully. It was a blow of a kind, but all her life she had been accustomed to act in emergencies. While Florence spoke, she was already weighing the pros and cons both of denial and confession, wondering whether there was still time to retreat, or whether, now she knew so much, it would not be less risky to let her know all.

"Do you deny the story, or do you not? That is what I want to know," asked Florence, in a much drier, harder voice than her usual one. "Don't forget that I can easily get the Carters' address, and write to them for more information,—if I want to."

Corrie's resolution was already taken.

"I do not deny it," she said, growing suddenly grave, and she turned her face openly to Florence. "What Cissy Carter says is true. I *was* married to a man called Wax, and I did conceal the fact; but, before you condemn me, listen to my story."

Then, after a stage pause, as Florence, a little taken aback by the frankness of the avowal, sat there rigid and silent, she began her narrative.

It had been on her dismissal from the Melbourne hospital that she had found her fellow-passenger, Philip Wax, waiting for her on the threshold, as it were. Stranded in a strange land, heartlessly abandoned by her employers, her situation was so desperate at the time that she had been forced to keep herself from starvation by sewing on shirt-buttons by the dozen for a firm of linen-drapers. Many small realistic details of those days were artistically thrown in, all well calculated to enhance the picture of pathetic misery, and nearly all true, for the Melbourne episode had in point of fact been one of the most trying ones of her career. She had no money either to pay her return passage, or to go on to Sydney. Then it was that Wax renewed the attack begun already on board the steamer. He was well-dressed, well-mannered, and also the possessor of a pair of magnificent black eyes, although Corrie omitted to touch upon this point; and while importuning her for her love, promised her a secure and easy existence. To listen to him was at least imprudent, but, despite her genius for calculation, the seeds of imprudence were in her constitution.

"Was it a great wonder that I gave way at last?" asked Lady Hepburne, clasping her small hands as though in an unconscious prayer for forgiveness, while her blue eyes hung pleadingly on Florence's face. "There was another image in my heart, but I saw no chance of ever meeting the living man again, and, besides, I was starving—not in a figurative

sense, but really and literally starving—and oh, you happy ones of the earth, you do not know how hunger hurts, how it persuades! I believed that Philip was a good man and that he loved me, and in my despair, I yielded at last. Very soon I found out what a mistake I had made. Disappointment followed upon disappointment, and ended in disgrace. Those few months were a short hell, and I tell you frankly that when, after the accident at N——, they brought me the news that my husband was among the killed, I knelt down and prayed for the first time since many months—it was a prayer of thanksgiving. Only two months earlier he had defrauded the bank he was employed in, and at that very moment the police were on his track. In this way, at least, the worst of the shame was spared to both him and me. Perhaps you can imagine a little of what I suffered through it all, and perhaps it will help you to judge me more leniently."

She paused, with her eyes still on Florence's face. It was the first time since the days of their earliest acquaintance that she had spoken in this gently submissive, almost deferential tone. The exultant, self-confident Lady Hepburne had disappeared for the moment; it seemed to be the ill-used little schoolmistress who was speaking. Exactly in this same tone had that first, so pathetic narrative been given, but never again could it move the hearer as it had moved her then. Probably some of the story was true, for Florence knew by this time that Corrie was far too clever ever to invent entirely, but even the true parts would be told from *her* point of view, as Florence also knew—to her cost.

"Then you were a widow when you came home to England?" she coldly inquired.

Corrie, her face buried in her hands, made a sign of assent.

"And you were a widow when you told me all that story of your immovable fidelity to Sir Louis?" Her upper lip twitched scornfully as she spoke.

"Let me explain; you don't understand——"

"And if you were a widow," Florence pursued mercilessly, "why did you call yourself Miss Farthingall?"

"Can you not guess? After what had been, can you imagine any honest woman still wishing to hear the name of that man? I did not feel strong enough to carry that stigma about with me, and so, when at length I had saved money enough to return to my beloved country" (it was, of course, obviously superfluous to mention here the name of the elderly manufacturer who had played such a part in quickening her sense of home-sickness), "I gladly returned to my maiden name. It was easy enough for me, since no one in England knew of my marriage. It had been so hurried, and the disillusionment had come so quickly, that it remained secret even from my mother. Do you really think it was a crime to deceive the world in such a case?"

"It may not have been a crime to deceive the world, but it was a crime to deceive *him* and me."

"There was no deception," said Corrie, with eager volubility, "not in the real sense of the word. All that I told you was literally true. It really was Louis who was my hero. The moment of weakness when I gave way to Philip's wooing, and those few miser-

able months I lived with him, could not really alter that fact. My whole marriage was but an accident, an episode. Nothing but sheer hunger could have driven me to that seeming infidelity. Just consider a little what my position was——"

"Yes, yes," said Florence, impatiently; "I can understand your having married the man, but I cannot understand your having dared to conceal the fact from your second husband; or, perhaps, you told him the truth before he married you?" she asked quickly, fixing a keenly questioning glance on Lady Hepburne's face.

Corrie hesitated for one moment. A little later on she saw that what she ought to have done was to fall in immediately with this idea, but at the time she somehow overlooked her opportunity; perhaps it was that the directness in the gaze of those so stubbornly honest, transparently pure grey eyes actually succeeded in confusing her a little, though it was so long since she had experienced the sensation that she scarcely recognized it. Once having hesitated, there was, of course, no repairing the mistake.

"Even to him I could not make up my mind to confide that I had been the wife of a swindler," she gently replied. "I was not acting wrongly towards Louis, since I really loved him, and had loved him even in the moment when I married Philip. I could see no object in telling him——"

"But you will tell him now, immediately," said Florence, in the tone of one who has the right to command obedience here. "I don't care whether there is any object in it or not, but it cannot be right that a husband should be so completely ignorant of his wife's

antecedents. Do you promise to tell him the whole truth to-day?"

Corrie moved uneasily on her chair.

"What good could that possibly do—now?"

"Do you promise? Please make up your mind. For if you do not tell him, it may be that I shall feel it my duty to tell him myself. It is monstrous that he should not know!"

Corrie's eyes first opened wide and then narrowed again, until only a thin line of blue was visible between the lids.

"You?" she said; and, for the first time since the beginning of the interview, a touch of the old impertinence rang in her tone. "And do you really feel sure enough of yourself to enter into such delicate explanations with Louis? Are you not afraid of the excitement it might bring with it?"

Florence, though deadly pale, found strength to return the mocking gaze without flinching, but the words would not come immediately. In the bottom of her frightened heart she felt that what Corrie said was true; she was not sure enough of herself to risk the scene that would be inevitable.

Meanwhile Lady Hepburne, marking the effect produced, had rapidly changed her tone.

"I confess that you are right," she said, with all her former gentleness, and softly laying her fingertips upon Florence's cold, unresponsive hand, "and I confess that I am to blame. He *ought* to know, and he shall know in time—he really shall; but only be lenient to my cowardice, and let me choose my own moment! Here, in town, there is so little quiet. Let me wait until we are at home again; and, above all,

let it be from *me* alone that he hears the unhappy story, otherwise, how could I expect him to forgive me? You will promise, will you not, not to let a word escape you for the present? I ask it of you by the love you have borne him, for, think only how much greater would be the shock to him if he hears the truth from any lips but my own. You see, I throw myself entirely on your mercy. You will not be too hard upon me, will you? You who are so brave and strong!"

Thus she pleaded on in that soft voice of hers, which could ring so sharply when she chose; and Florence, sitting there, pale and rigid, listened unwillingly, struggling with herself the while.

The discovery she had made chilled her to the very heart. Up to that moment her bitter disappointment at the result of Louis's marriage had been tempered by the thought that at any rate it had been his duty to marry this woman; now this theory had fallen to the ground with a crash. The ill-used girl, with the broken heart, which no one but Louis could mend again, confessed to a husband whom she had found it more convenient to conceal. All the romance was gone from the situation, as well as all the sense of justice. The sacrifice which both she and Louis had made appeared now in quite a different light; almost in that of an absurdity. And besides the galling sense of ridicule, there was the horror at a duplicity so directly contrary to every instinct of her straightforward and somewhat uncompromising nature. Could it be right that Louis should continue to be deceived by this arch-actress?—for she distrusted the woman too thoroughly to put the slightest

belief in that talk of future confession—and yet, how take upon herself the task of enlightening him? And could this enlightenment help bringing about a further estrangement between husband and wife, the demolishing of the last possibility of their being able to live together, at least without outward scandal? Who was she to interfere between wedded people? She must have been mad to conceive such a thought.

"Yes, I will promise not to speak," said Florence, abruptly, overcome by a sudden sense of her own weakness. "I will leave it to your conscience."

She rose from her chair, feeling that it would be unbearable to stay a moment longer.

Already Corrie's arms were round her neck, while childishly fervent thanks were being poured into her ear.

"God bless you! I knew that you were good and generous. I will tell him myself; only leave it to me!"

At the same moment her eyes fell on the rococo clock on the mantelpiece, and she almost shrieked.

"A quarter to seven! Merciful heavens! can we have been talking so long? And that dress to try on before dinner! Won't you stay and see me in it, by-the-by?"

"No, thank you," said Florence, warily; "I cannot stay."

As she went out by one door, Corrie flitted out by the other, once more all smiles and joyful anticipation. She had had a fright, undoubtedly, for in the bottom of her heart she was afraid of her husband. But that was over now, and already her elastic spirits were recovering from the shock. Florence had given

the required promise, and she was to be counted on as on a rock—this Corrie knew instinctively—and as for the Carters, it was a bore, of course, their having found out, but luckily they had left the country, and very likely would never turn up again—her naturally sanguine temperament almost took it for granted that they never would—and other chances of discovery were too remote to be taken into consideration. And, after all, even if the worst came to the worst, there couldn't be anything worse than a bad scene, since—the fact of her having been a widow instead of a maid when he led her to the altar, couldn't authorize Louis to unmarry her. And meanwhile, there was a pale-green gown lying upstairs on the bed.

So it was with a song on her lips that Corrie regained her room. It was not upon her that the interview had left its shadow, it was on Florence, who at that moment was slowly descending the stairs, in a yet deeper perturbation of spirit than when she had mounted them two hours ago.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GENTILLE BERGÈRE.

It had been an agitating summer for Edith Hepburne, by far the most agitating that had yet come to her peaceful and somewhat sleepy existence. Very early in the season it had become clear that Mr. Ruckton's attentions were serious, and a little before the rush from town he had spoken, with the result that Edith came back to Stonefield floating upon an ocean of placid bliss, and engaged to be married within three months. Little by little, however, something had come to ruffle the perfection of her content, and, oddly enough, it was Willy's own advent which had been the signal for destroying her peace. The first few days were, indeed, all that she had expected, but before a week had passed, she began to feel uneasy about she knew not what, something which at first she did not quite grasp, and which, having grasped, she did not like to acknowledge even to herself.

Hitherto Edith's feelings towards her brother's wife had been a mixture of dazzled admiration and of uncomprehending awe for a creature so entirely opposite to herself at every point. Within the last month a shade of timid disapproval had got mixed with this sentiment, for Corrie, returning home,

flushed with triumphs and drunk with London, had lost no time in turning Stonefield into a very revel-house of pleasure, filling it from floor to attics with a succession of the very gayest people she had been able to pick up in town, and daily devising new plans for their entertainment. The grim old castle, silent for so long, had assuredly never before heard so much laughter as now echoed along its corridors; never had its broad staircase been swept by so many silk and velvet trains, unless it were in the days of hawking and hunting. The mediæval relic had become a noisily fashionable country-house, where "smart" young women knocked off the ashes of their cigarettes against the edges of some historical piece of stone carving, and where the "chappies" of the season lounged in the desecrated moat, "making eyes" the while at their fair-haired hostess.

It was all rather startling to Edith's conservative ideas, but it would have all mattered little if only Corrie had let Willy alone.

Looking back now at the origin of her present trouble, Edith fixed upon a certain moment on the very morrow of Willy's arrival at Stonefield. They had been strolling blissfully in the park, and Willy, in an access of ardour, had swung himself on to a tree-branch, to gather a bunch of rowan-berries which she had admired. Corrie joined them at that moment.

"What a useful sort of *fiancé* to have!" she laughed, as she approvingly watched the manipulations of the youthful figure among the branches. "He climbs well enough to fetch you a star, if you wanted it."

Even at the moment Edith vaguely noticed the ap-

proval in the eyes, and was vaguely disturbed by it, and it was only later on that she understood the reason. Willy himself had probably noticed nothing, being far too much concerned about the state of his hands, usually so spotless, which he rushed off to wash the moment he again reached the ground.

Yes, it was from that day that this apprehension had begun. That Corrie should have been suddenly struck by Willy's good looks appeared to Edith only too natural, but of course she had no right to show what she thought, and thus perplex the poor boy, and possibly give him a false impression. There was no doubt that he was changed; but what could be expected of him when so finished an adept in feminine arts as Corrie amused herself by throwing him favours which could mean nothing, of course, but which were yet only too well calculated to turn a youthful head.

"And of course she *is* much prettier than I am," sighed poor Edith, as she rose to look at herself critically in the glass, for it was in the solitude of her bedroom that these reflections were taking place, one October afternoon, "and oh, ever so much cleverer and more amusing! I would almost rather not see him at all than see him near her; but I suppose there is no chance of his going away until these theatricals are over."

The theatricals had been Corrie's last fancy. Having exhausted every other available form of excitement, and the autumn evenings beginning to lengthen, she had hit upon this idea. It had always been the dream of her life to go on the stage, as she frankly declared, and since Fate had been cruel enough to debar her from her real vocation, she would at least indulge

in this little sip at the cup of Thalia. And in truth, despite all the delights which riches had already brought her, it was only from the moment that the rehearsals began that Corrie felt herself entirely in her element, and therefore perfectly and entirely happy.

But it was exactly the rehearsals which had rendered Edith's fears acute. It was bad enough to have Willy going messages for Corrie, and dangling after her at odd moments, which he ought by rights to have devoted to his betrothed, but it was far, far worse to see him acting a rococo shepherd (and a preciously awkward one, too) to her rococo shepherdess, and, in the critical scene of the piece, pursuing her across the stage, in the mock endeavour to snatch a kiss. That Corrie should have put the *Gentille Bergère* on the repertoire was perfectly comprehensible even to Edith; probably she wanted to see herself in powder, and indeed no more suitable representative of an eighteenth-century herder of lambs could well be imagined; but why need she have selected Willy to personate the lover, when there were at least half a dozen other men in the house, all better qualified for the *rôle* than Willy, whose appearance had very little of the rococo about it, and whom even Edith's infatuation could not credit with the smallest gift for acting? Edith's own fears gave the answer to the question. The honest stupid girl was heartbroken, but not really astonished. She had never been able to understand what it was that had moved Willy to select her; and now it seemed so natural that any one else should be preferred to her poor humble self. But that it should just be Corrie!

Did Louis really see nothing? Why did he not interfere? It was true that he kept aloof from his guests to a degree that was barely polite, taking the business of the estate as a plea for constant absences. It was, therefore, possible that much might have escaped him; but still, to be as blind as this——

She was still deep in her thoughts when there came a knock at the door. It was the summons to rehearsal, her moment of torture, as she knew well.

She lingered before obeying, knowing that she had no part in the first piece on the list, and hoping that the critical scene in the *Gentille Bergère* would be over before she reached the spot.

And it was just over, as she perceived on opening the door of the drawing-room, which served as amateur play-house, though something in the expression of the assembled spectators told her that the performance had to-day not run quite on normal lines. The unusual hilarity on the faces around her changed rather suddenly into forced gravity, and it appeared to her that her own entrance had been the signal for this modification of mood. The dull apprehension within her took fresh growth.

With beating heart she slipped into a back place.

"Can you tell me why everybody was laughing so just now?" she asked, presently, in a half-whisper, when the performance had been resumed.

Her neighbour, a fresh arrival, with a youthful grin, a single eyeglass which *would* not sit in its place, and about as much brains as would go to furnish a new-born calf, was himself still twisting his lean frame in silent convulsions at the excellency of the past joke. He now pulled himself forcibly together, and whis-

pered back shakily and with the corners of his mouth still twitching—

"Awfully good fun, you know; never would have thought it of Ruckton. Didn't look as if he had so much in him. Pity you missed it. Would have made you laugh awfully."

"But you haven't told me what it was."

"You know the scene when the shepherd runs after the shepherdess and tries to kiss her, don't you? Well, the joke is that to-day he almost succeeded—ha, ha! In fact, *my* impression is that he quite succeeded, though I was a little too far off to be quite sure, and though, of course, Lady Hepburne denies it. Anyway, it was a close shave, that it was—hi, hi, hi! But, by Jove!" he added, catching himself up with a gasp as he met Edith's horrified eyes, and the recollection of the engagement stirred somewhere within his inner consciousness, "I forgot that this mightn't amuse you; and there was no harm done, you know, even if I *did* see right. All in the heat of the acting, you know—all in the heat of the acting."

Edith said nothing, and stared blankly at the stage. It seemed to her that Willy's boyish face was shining in a way which soap and water alone could never have made it shine, and that Corrie had never looked so fascinating, nor yet so triumphant as to-day. She had feared her defeat before, now she was sure of it.

"To-morrow at the same hour a dress rehearsal," announced Lady Hepburne at the close of the performance. "Let every one look to their clothes. By-the-by, Willy, do you know how to powder your hair, or shall I have to do it for you?"

These were the last words that fell on Edith's ears as, with a choking sensation in her throat, she slunk from the room, while the coquettishly impertinent glance with which the question was accompanied seemed to pursue her out into the passage.

An hour later Sir Louis, returning in the dusk from a solitary tramp with his gun, stumbled upon his sister in the furthest corner of the shrubbery, alone and in tears, and stopped short in amazement beside the bench on which she was apparently sobbing her heart out.

"Edith! Can this be you, or do I not see aright?"

It was the first time that he had ever seen his younger sister in anything but her usual tranquilly submissive and outwardly quite unemotional mood. It had never even occurred to him that she could shed tears at the rate at which she was now actually shedding them before his eyes.

"What reason can *you* have for grieving?" he asked wonderingly. "I thought that at least all your wishes had been fulfilled."

Edith looked up with swollen eyes and heaving breast. Until this moment she had had no thought of taking any active steps in her own cause. Recognizing the peril, she had immediately given herself up for lost, without the idea of striking even a blow in self-defence. It was only now that, seeing her brother before her, something like rebellion moved in the depths of her meek spirit, for although her personal humility belonged to the abject order, it is well-known that under sufficient provocation even a worm will turn. Why should she not appeal to her brother?

If it was anybody's business besides her own it was his.

"It is about Willy," she sobbed incoherently—"about Willy and Corrie. They are making me so—so wretched."

"Willy and Corrie?" repeated Sir Louis, in evident surprise. "I don't quite understand you, Edith."

"Anybody else would understand," she said, with a passing flash of spirit. "You only need to look about you in order to see what is going on."

"What is it that is going on?" He put the question with a sudden sternness of tone, and as he spoke he deliberately placed his gun against the end of the bench, and sat down beside his sister, as though prepared for an explanation. "Whatever you have to say to me, Edith, tell it me now; but be sure you do not let either your feelings or your imagination run away with you. I want only the plain truth."

And then, with many hesitations and catchings of the breath, Edith told her poor little tale, confessing the terror which was devouring her—the terror of having lost Willy's love, and to a woman who could have no use for it. That this woman happened to be her brother's wife added of course a good deal to the gravity of the situation, although in her present state of mental anguish this could be but a secondary consideration. Nevertheless, there came a moment when, although she could not see her brother's face in the thickly falling dusk, it occurred to her to say, almost deprecatingly—

"She means no harm, I suppose, but Willy takes

everything so seriously, and she *is* so tremendously pretty."

Sir Louis made no reply. He had listened carefully to her first words, but long before she had done speaking, his thoughts were taking their own course. Not that he disbelieved her—he believed her entirely, and was not even greatly surprised. Now that his attention was directed to the matter, he could even recall sundry small circumstances, barely marked at the time, which seemed to throw more light upon the situation. As he sat there with folded arms in the dark shrubbery, gnawing fiercely at his moustache, it was with himself that he was chiefly provoked. Quite clearly he saw now that his system of leaving to his wife unbounded freedom of action, in return for immunity from her society, was imperfect. To indulge her in all her wildest fancies was doubtless a convenient way of making up for not being able to love her, but it should not be carried too far. It had been part of his system to studiously avoid watching her, and this, then, was the result.

He was so deep in his thoughts that Edith, pausing at last for some sort of answer, thought that nothing was ever coming. Not that she expected much, nor had ever really hoped that Louis could do anything to help her, but she yearned for at least a sign of brotherly sympathy.

"Have you nothing to say, Louis?" she timidly inquired.

He roused himself, as though from sleep, and, rising hastily, stretched out his hand for his gun.

"I am going to see about it," he said, and made a step as though to leave her, but in a moment turned

back again. "You have an invitation from Lady Marston, have you not?" he asked unexpectedly. "The best thing you can do is to wire back a 'Yes' instead of the 'No' you meant to send and to start to-morrow morning."

"You want to send me away?" she gasped. "And with Willy in the house!"

"Leave Willy to me. Do as I tell you and trust to me. Will you trust to me, Edith?" And he laid his hand for a moment on her disordered hair. "And look here," he added, as her face disappeared once more behind her handkerchief. "This thing will all come right if only you can break yourself of your mania for self-depreciation. Willy is a little idiot—saving your presence; but if you want him back again, you can have him. Just see if he doesn't come crawling back on his knees the moment that other influences are removed."

With the last words his voice hardened once more, and, turning rapidly, he disappeared in the direction of the house, leaving Edith still crying on the bench.

It was to his wife's room that Sir Louis mounted straightway. She would probably be dressing for dinner by this time, but that could not signify; there must be no delay.

Corrie, sitting at her dressing-table, half drowned in the folds of a muslin *peignoir*, and keeping her eyes tight shut, in order to avoid the violet powder with which her French maid was delicately operating upon her hair, was startled by the loud knock and the abrupt entry which followed before there had been time to give a reply. She was still more astonished when, on opening her eyes, she saw her husband

standing before her in a stained shooting-suit and with marks of gunpowder upon his hands, at sight of which her first instinctive movement was to draw the folds of her snowy *peignoir* more closely around her.

"Send away your maid," he said in a low tone.

She obeyed in sheer surprise, and then looked at him again. He had been biting his moustache, and his brows were drawn rather deep over his eyes, both symptoms of annoyance with him, "Can he have found out about Philip?" was her first thought, and she braced herself for a scene.

"I have come to tell you that Edith leaves to-morrow morning," Sir Louis began, as soon as the maid had closed the door behind her. "She has decided to accept Lady Marston's invitation."

"Has she, indeed?" said Corrie, with heartfelt relief, and wondering why the announcement should be made so solemnly.

"And, of course, since she goes, Willy will leave us too; there is no object in his staying here after her departure."

A shade of annoyance crossed Corrie's face.

"Willy? But he can't go, at any rate, until after the theatricals."

"Indeed, he can. He will go to-morrow, immediately after Edith."

"Has he said so?"

"*I* say so, and he can't very well see the matter from a different point of view to mine."

"Do you mean that you——?"

"I mean that I will make him understand perfect-

ly at what place he is wanted, and at what place he is not."

Corrie, her artificially white head emerging from the clouds of her white toilet-mantle, sat dumfounded. Out of sheer annoyance she came very near to crying at that moment.

"But, Louis, how unreasonable! I can't do without him for the play."

"You will have to do without him for the play, as well as for real life."

"What do you mean?" she asked, quaking a little under his eyes.

"You know very well what I mean. I do not advise you to urge me to plainer language, and I do not advise you to try my patience too far. I am neither a parson nor a street-preacher, and I can bear a good deal, so long as you keep within bounds; but I think it is time to tell you that I could never forgive a stain on my name. Of course, I do not ask you to abstain from 'platonic friendships,' or 'harmless flirtations,' or whatever the fashionable designation is, but I *do* ask you to use a little discretion in the choice of your victims and in especial to have a little regard for my relations. There are enough young fools at your disposal without tormenting that poor child."

"But, Louis, I assure you——"

"I have asked for no assurances. I only came here to tell you that both Edith and Willy will leave Stonefield to-morrow, and that in future you will be so good as to leave the boy alone. I do not know how far his head is turned by this time, but you had better remember that, even at the risk of being considered

strait-laced, I shall allow no communication whatever between him and you. Have I made myself clear?"

"Quite," murmured Corrie, cowed for almost the first time in her life.

Up to now, even under considerable provocation, Louis had always addressed his wife with studious politeness. This, too, had been part of his system, but to-day the thought that his sister's happiness was at stake had swept aside every other consideration, and imparted to his tone something that was so harsh as to be almost brutal.

"You are very hard upon me, Louis," added Corrie, plaintively, fumbling the while at the buttons of her toilet-mantle. She did not quite dare to make another appeal in words, although Willy's departure, just at this moment, provoked her excessively; but there exist other ways of appealing to stern husbands —ways known to every daughter of Eve; and as she now, with a deft and rapid gesture, divested herself of her lace wrapper, Corrie was acting more from instinct than from thought. Her innate sense of the dramatic told her that the right moment had come. As the delicate fabric sank to the floor, she rose from her chair, a picture unveiled, as dainty a *poudré* shepherdess as ever poet's fancy caused to trip under the boughs of blossoming trees, with short, hoop-skirts, revealing tiny, satin-shod feet, deep-cut, rose-trimmed bodice, and a bare and dazzling throat.

"I suppose I may as well take off this dress," she said, with a quasi-tragic sigh, and yet beginning to smile in spite of herself at the sight of the reflection in the glass. "It was only a private rehearsal, of course, but there need be no rehearsals, since, if Willy goes, it

will be all up with the play." And, while pretending to hang her head, she glanced at him slyly and keenly, to see the effect upon him.

The effect was indeed there, plainly to be read upon his face, but it was quite different from what she had looked for. The coldness in the eyes fixed upon her struck her like a breath of chill air.

"Is this the costume in which you intended to act before our guests?" he asked, after a moment of silence.

"Of course it is;" and she attempted to pout. "Have you anything to say about it?"

Sir Louis's eyes passed once more over the figure before him, as though the better to take in all its points —the impudently short skirts, the unnecessarily transparent sleeves, the audaciously low bodice, and, above it, the eager face, slyly intent upon his expression—a little fuller in outline than it had been a year ago, a little more highly coloured, and a little less delicate in surface, but still, in truth, fair enough—fair and shameless; and, as he looked, there was added to the coldness in his eyes something that came near to disgust.

"I have this to say about it, that you certainly have not my leave to appear in this ridiculous rig-out. I have no idea of being made a laughing-stock for the country. If you still want to act a shepherdess, you will have to modify this dress considerably."

He turned with a disagreeable laugh, and left her standing before her toilet-table, dumb with astonishment.

"And this is the woman I am bound to for life!" was Louis's thought as he closed the door behind him;

and for one desperate moment he thought of the gun he had left in the lobby downstairs, and tried to remember whether it was still loaded. Would not a bullet be a fit ending to this dreary comedy, out of which there seemed no escape for all the best years of his life? Never before had the utter unsuitability of their two natures, the utter impossibility of finding a common basis of thought on any single point, been borne in more forcibly upon him; and never before had escape from this well-nigh unbearable position appeared more distant and more hopeless.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNWELCOME LETTER.

It was a few days after the scene last recorded that Florence, having gone out to dine at a neighbour's house, was agreeably surprised by catching sight of Mrs. Ripon's face among those of the assembled guests. She had indeed heard of her recent arrival at Stonefield, but she had not been able to make up her mind to call upon her there, just as she had found excuses for keeping aloof from all the noisy festivities, which for weeks past had been dazzling as well as slightly scandalizing the neighbourhood. People must make remarks if they liked, but since the explanation by the riverside, now a year ago—to meet Louis in his own house had come to be something beyond her powers of self-control. All the more did she bless the chance of to-day. It was to the half-hour after dinner that she looked for the opportunity of at least a few words with her friend. But it seemed as though this hope were to be baffled, for scarcely had she crossed the threshold of the drawing-room than a lean arm was slipped within hers, and she felt herself being resolutely led towards the very furthest and obscurest corner of the apartment. It took her a moment to perceive that it was the Tiger-Lily who was

thus forcibly abducting her, and evidently with a fixed purpose, as was clearly legible upon her withered features.

"You have had the last news from Stonefield, I suppose?" began Miss Ward, having installed both herself and Florence upon a low seat, well screened from the rest of the room by a pyramid of ferns.

The Tiger-Lily, be it here remarked, had been among the very few who had refused to "grovel"—as she termed it—to the reigning Lady Hepburne. Crushing though the blow of the engagement had been, it had not sufficed to make her bow her stiff neck. Unbending as her prototype, she had remained true to her bellicose attitude. The fact of Sir Louis having married a schoolmistress could not, in her opinion, alter the fact that the schoolmistress had no right to get married by him.

"No, I have heard no news," said Florence, startled; "has anything happened?"

"That depends upon what you call happening. *I* call it a good deal when a husband has to send a young man out of the house, because of his wife's flirting with him so outrageously that his own sister's engagement is in danger of being broken off four weeks before the wedding-day. I always said that young person would come to no good."

Miss Ward snorted audibly, evidently revelling in the sound of her own words. Within the same minute she was pouring into Florence's ears the last of the many versions concerning Edith Hepburne's abrupt departure which were flying about the country.

Florence listened unwillingly, yet was vaguely conscious of a certain painful curiosity. They were

not the first remarks of the sort which she had lately heard passed upon Louis's wife, but they were the most unveiled.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked wearily. "Is it my business?"

Miss Ward's bare hand covered her own for a moment, while the thin neck swayed ungracefully towards her, as a stiff stalk is moved by the wind.

"Yes, it is your business," she said in a whisper which could almost be described as explosive. "You know very well that if you had stuck to your engagement with that man it never would have come to this."

Florence gazed in surprise at the small lustreless eyes nailed angrily, almost vindictively, on her face. She could not know that for two years past the Tiger-Lily had been harbouring a grudge against her, never having been able to forgive her for leaving the road to Stonefield open to the detested schoolmistress.

"If you had married him, all this scandal would have been spared the country. Any one can see that he is wretched——"

A shadow fell upon them that was not the shadow of the ferns. Florence, glancing quickly up, rose with an exclamation on her lips, for Mrs. Ripon was standing close beside them.

"Our hostess wishes to consult you about your recipe for preserving plums," said Mrs. Ripon; but though she spoke so quietly, Florence knew that she had overheard the last words.

Miss Ward, who was almost as keen about preserves as about keeping young persons in their proper places, broke into a sour smile, and glided away in the given direction.

Mrs. Ripon and Florence were standing face to face behind the screen of ferns, alone to all intents and purposes.

"She—she didn't really mean it," began Florence, without reflection.

Mrs. Ripon smiled kindly and a little sadly.

"I think she did, and, what is more, she is right. A pretty state of affairs it is that I have found at Stonefield! Ah, child, child, you have much to answer for!" And, trusting to the ferns, she laid one of her large, well-shaped hands upon Florence's shoulder, and looked deep into the girl's eyes.

Despite their intimacy, which had grown apace in London, this was the first time that the subject which lay near both their hearts had been so directly alluded to between them.

For a long minute they looked at each other, then Mrs. Ripon gave a quick little shake to Florence's shoulder, and let it go.

"Come, child," she said, forcibly changing her tone, "whatever you do, don't look so tragic! There's never been any use crying over spilt milk. You almost look as though you'd been after something of the sort. I'm not pleased with your face. What you require is shaking up. Will you come and see me to-morrow?"

"At Stonefield? Oh no; you mustn't ask that. I can't go *there!*"

"If we're to have anything like a talk, you really must, for the horses are all in Corrie's service—or those of her guests," she added, with a just perceptibly contemptuous inflection of voice. "It is only by chance that I can capture a pair occasionally. If

you come to-morrow, you needn't see anybody but me, for she is quite absorbed in a new batch of fashionables. And, by-the-by, Louis is going up to town early to-morrow," she added, with apparent indifference.

"Very well, I will come," said Florence, after a moment's hesitation. The inducement of a long, quiet forenoon with Louis's sister was too great to be resisted. She felt as though within the last minute only their friendship had become unshakably established. Henceforth, though the vital subject might never again be directly alluded to between them, she would know that they understood each other entirely and perfectly.

Her heavy heart was heavier than usual as she laid her head on the pillow that night. Yes, she had much to answer for—everybody said the same thing: the Tiger-Lily, and Mrs. Ripon, and Louis himself, and her own heart, which cried out the accusation loudest of all. On this evening she was visited by that same passing feeling of despair, that same sense of the hopelessness of an escape, which had come to Sir Louis after the last explanation with his wife. It is in moments like this that we say: "It cannot be borne!" Knowing all the time that it must be borne, and perfectly aware that when we have fretted our fill we shall do the only thing that is to be done, namely, stoop once more, and take up our burden.

The business which Sir Louis had in town made it necessary for him to take an early train, and thus it was that on the morning after Mrs. Ripon's dinner at the Black's he came down from his room before his usual hour, meaning to snatch a solitary breakfast,

and be off before the dining-room was invaded by his wife's guests. In the big entrance-hall a freshly piled up fire was crackling boisterously in the grate, sending out a glow that was extremely welcome on this chilly October morning. It was scarcely broad daylight yet, though it was past eight o'clock, and white shreds of mist hung about the gothic windows like ghosts, and seemed to be peering in longingly at the warmth and comfort within. Everything was exactly as it was wont to be on days of this sort; nothing was there to tell him that he was close to a turning-point in his life. Even the basket-table stood on its usual spot on the rug, and on it the same silver salver that was there every morning, laden with the early post. How often had he stopped beside it to turn over its contents, and why should any difference be made by his doing so to-day?

There were two business letters for himself, and five missives, that were certainly *not* business letters, for Corrie, delicate missives which have the stamp of "society" upon their cream-laid texture, and in the balmy odour they exhaled. The only exception was a long, bluish envelope, on which Sir Louis happened to catch sight of the mark of the dressmaker's firm which supplied most of Corrie's evening gowns. He tossed the lot on to the mantelpiece, and applied himself to his own correspondence. As he unfolded the first sheet the hall door was briskly opened, and Corrie, ravishingly clad in grey tweed, entered with brilliant cheeks, and limp, golden hair, uncurled by the damp rawness of the morning. Since her rise in the world late sleeping was her general rule, but in consequence of a new-born craze for "byking" lessons, which it

was found more convenient to take before everybody was down, the habit had been temporarily suspended.

"Ah, that's something like a fire!" she cried gleefully, running with extended hands towards the hearth. "It makes one forget the beastly wet outside!"

She laughed light-heartedly. The week that had passed, and the "byking," had quite sufficed to console her for the *contretemps* which her husband's absurd rigour had brought about; and how should it not, seeing that the young Marquis of Maulesley, who had volunteered to become her teacher in the new art, was at least twice as good-looking as Willy, and ten times as amusing?

"Anything for me?" she queried gaily, her eye falling on the silver tray.

Sir Louis handed her the parcel of letters in silence. A big easy-chair stood invitingly near. With a little sigh of comfort Corrie sank into its hospitable arms, and stretched her small feet towards the glow.

A minute or two passed in silence, broken only by the crackling of wood, and the rustling of note-paper. All at once Sir Louis, leaning with one elbow on the broad oaken mantelpiece, and deep in his own correspondence, heard something like a smothered cry, and looked up startled.

Corrie, the bright colour all faded from her face, her eyes opened wider than was quite natural, was sitting upright in the deep chair, staring fixedly at the letter in her hand. It was a letter written closely on thin, foreign-looking paper.

"What is it?" he asked in astonishment, for he had never seen her unnerved before.

"What is it?" he repeated after a moment, for she did not seem to have heard. This time he had spoken more sharply, and with a half-convulsive movement she pulled herself together.

"Nothing, nothing at all," she faltered, meeting his eyes with her own startled gaze. "Only some bad news about a friend."

As she spoke he saw that she was trying to hide the letter she held under the pile on her knees. He looked again at her perturbed face, and quite suddenly a suspicion shot across his mind.

"From whom is that letter?" he asked quickly.

She stared at him almost wildly for a moment. The tweed cap had got pushed to one side, and this, together with the damp locks hanging in disorder upon her pale forehead, gave her a whimsically rakish, and at the same time boyish, air, as of some youth who has been drinking.

"It is from my dressmaker; don't you see the envelope?"

He glanced at the bluish envelope which had fallen to the floor.

"Then there was an enclosure," he said after a moment's pause. "That sheet you have in your hand does not match the envelope. There was certainly an enclosure. Who was it from?"

"From a friend," she faltered, as though against her will; "somebody I used to know."

"Is it from Willy Ruckton?"

"No, oh no! I swear to you that it is not."

He fixed her hard with his eyes for another moment.

"You are lying," he said contemptuously. "The

letter is from Willy. You are in correspondence with him."

"But Louis——"

"Show it me!" he interrupted, putting out his hand.

She made a movement as though to cover the scattered papers with her two arms; it looked like an impulse of terror.

"I cannot—it is a secret—somebody else's secret; it would be a breach of confidence. If you would only believe me——"

Sir Louis stepped up close to the chair on which his wife sat cowering.

"I do *not* believe you," he said quickly, looking down upon her with coldly resolute eyes; "and I will make you give me that letter. I hope you will not oblige me to show you that I am stronger than you?"

She stared up at him, still frightfully pale, and with something like desperation in her eyes.

"Will it satisfy you if I show you the signature?" she asked, after a breathless pause. "I tell you that the letter is confidential; but if you see the signature, you will believe that it is not from Willy?"

He put out his hand without replying.

Fumbling among the papers she pulled out the sheet, and with trembling fingers folded it so that only the signature was visible. As she held it towards him, she was watching him with a look of strain which sat strangely upon her usually so careless features. It was the same thin, closely written sheet which he had seen in her hand a minute ago.

He glanced at the name, and handed the letter back again.

"I see I was mistaken," he said coldly.

Corrie grasped the sheet as though it had been a prize, and rose unsteadily to her feet.

"May I go now?" she asked, with a quite new humility.

Sir Louis made a movement which was as much as to say, "Pray don't let me detain you!" And gathering up her papers in her two hands, she fled towards the staircase, as though from some pursuing danger, in her haste almost running against her sister-in-law, at that moment entering the hall.

Mrs. Ripon looked after her, and then at Louis's face.

"Something is wrong?" she said, meeting her brother's gaze. "I hope you are not going to start 'scenes,' Louis; that has never done any good in the world," and she smiled a valiant but anxious smile. Though Louis had never actually told her any of his secrets, she yet knew them well enough.

"Oh, nothing is more wrong than usual," was the impatient answer. "Only I made a bit of a fool of myself by insisting on seeing a letter which I imagined was from Willy."

"Well?"

"Well, and it wasn't from Willy. I saw the signature."

Mrs. Ripon drew nearer the fire.

"Who was it from then? Judging from her face, she hadn't been hearing from a mere indifferent acquaintance. You say you saw the name?"

"It wasn't one I know."

"Can't you remember it?"

Sir Louis reflected for a moment. He was just about to say that he couldn't when suddenly across the blankness of his mind he saw the name written as he had seen it upon the thin sheet, having fastened itself there by one of those tricks of memory which it is so hard to analyze.

"Wax!" he said, aloud, as though he were reading it off a paper. "Philip Wax—yes, that was it. Odd that it should have stuck in my mind; but that's because the name itself is odd. Wax has the property of sticking, to be sure. Sounds like somebody out of the 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' doesn't he?"

"And it never occurred to you to ask Corrie who he was?"

"No, it didn't. All I cared to know was whether the letter was from Willy or not; and that not for my sake," he added, with a dreary laugh, "but only for Edith's."

"How terribly like a man! But I dare say it is of no consequence," went on Mrs. Ripon, quickly, glancing at his overclouded face.

In her heart of hearts she thought that it might be of great consequence, for she distrusted her brother's wife far more deeply than did Louis himself, and —putting Willy quite apart—thought her capable of entertaining any number of clandestine, and at least doubtful, correspondences behind her husband's back; but what good could it do to excite his suspicions further? None at all, she decided, and accordingly changed the subject by calling his attention to the clock, and to the small margin now left for the catching of his train. Her own thoughts, however, re-

mained fastened on the incident, and the feminine curiosity of which even strong-minded women have their share, lingered during breakfast, and beyond it, round the question as to who the man with the queer name could be, the reception of whose letter was capable of throwing the self-possessed Corrie into so strange a state of emotion.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MORNING CALL.

It was one of those damp, still, October days, when nothing seems to be stirring except the falling leaves and dropping berries. As early in the forenoon—earlier than would have been permissible for a conventional visit—Florence and her pony-carriage wended their way through the half-stripped. but still gorgeous lanes, the familiar landscape was veiled before her eyes by a hovering cloud of grey which hung in mid-air, blurring the outlines of trees and bushes, extinguishing the distant flash of the broadly winding river, and toning down the red and yellow of the leaves close at hand. Shreds of mist hung upon the hedges, like flakes of wool caught on the thorns, and even the last remaining brambles, which the fall of the leaves had laid bare in their deepest hiding-places, dripped with the dampness of the day. At one spot only a whitish blur in the universal grey seemed to betray that somewhere or other the sun might be shining, though here all was dark and dull, a sunshine as difficult to believe in as the happiness of others when our own life is joyless. Scarcely an acceptable morning for a drive, but Florence, with her thoughts fixed on the hours in store for her, scarcely noticed the raw-

ness of the morning. As she reached the turn of the road which on a clearer morning would have revealed to her the hills close at hand, she distinctly felt her spirits stirred by the prospect of the approaching meeting. It was at this very spot that she had on a certain fateful day—now more than two years ago—caught her first glimpse of a well-remembered black figure, destined to play so weighty a part in her life. Since then she had never been able to pass this way without a sharp pang at her heart. Nothing had warned her then, and nothing warned her now, of the things that were coming, as no inner voice told her that this day was destined to undo what the other had begun.

The footman who opened the door had evidently received his instructions, for he met her with the information that Mrs. Ripon was in her own room and at leisure. She was following him down the long passage which traversed the castle from end to end, when a door close at hand was opened, and Lady Hepburne came out. At sight of Florence, she drew back, as though hoping she had not been remarked, but meeting the other's eyes, hesitated and then came forward, having evidently decided that it was too late to remain invisible.

"I am going to see Mrs. Ripon," said Florence, hurriedly, standing still perforce, at least as much annoyed by the meeting as apparently Corrie appeared to be. "I know you are too busy with your guests to attend to me."

Corrie put out her hand, smiling mechanically.

"Yes, thanks, I am very busy," she murmured, without any of her usual animation.

Florence just touched the hand held out, glancing into her hostess's face as she did so.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked, quickly. "Are you ill?"

She had suddenly perceived that Corrie's face was almost colourless, while her blue eyes had in them a startled look, like that of a person who has not yet recovered from some great fright. The pale, golden locks straying over her forehead added a touch of wildness to her appearance. It almost looked as though she had forgotten to do her hair.

At Florence's question, she flushed suddenly.

"What makes you think that anything is the matter?" she asked, with a quite unusual sharpness of tone. "I am not ill; I am only tired. It is those cycling lessons, I suppose. Don't stare at me like that, please; and please let me pass. There are people waiting for me."

Florence coldly inclined her head, and passed on, lost in astonishment. She had seen the ex-Miss Farthingall in many moods, but never in one like this, for her temper, as a rule, was perfect, and serious irritation a thing of which she seemed incapable. It must be something grave indeed which had upset her so entirely.

Mrs. Ripon was alone and at leisure, exactly as the footman had announced, but, despite the warm welcome, the first five minutes made it clear to Florence that her friend, though outwardly unoccupied, was not in one of her most conversational moods. Last night she had seemed to be looking forward to the forenoon *en tête-à-tête*, as much as Florence herself, but now that the moment had come, a certain pre-

occupied air betrayed that her mind was not free. For about a quarter of an hour the talk flagged strangely. Mrs. Ripon, generally an excellent talker, made languid remarks about the season and the neighbourhood, followed by long pauses between, during which her thoughts were evidently busy elsewhere. Florence, with an odd sense of disappointment, was beginning to ask herself what was the matter with them both to-day, when Mrs. Ripon, emerging from one of her moments of reflection, remarked abruptly—

"There isn't any one in the county called Wax, is there?"

A moment before Florence had risen from her chair, and was bending over a big jar filled with red hips and black sloes and golden-brown bracken,—such an autumnal nosegay as can be picked along any hedgerow at this season. They were not arranged after her taste, and it had occurred to her to settle them differently, as a way of passing the time. At the sound of Mrs. Ripon's question, she turned round suddenly.

"Wax?" she repeated in a tone of sharp surprise.

"Yes; do you happen to know the name? I see you do," she added quickly, as Florence stared back at her with startled eyes. "Now tell me at once who he is."

"Why do you want to know?"

Mrs. Ripon looked at her doubtfully for a moment.

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you," she remarked at last. "After last night, I feel as if it would be useless trying to keep our secrets from each

other. The fact is that this person is a correspondent of Corrie's, and I want to find out what business he has to be so. I can't make Louis happy, but I should like to save him from disgrace if I can."

"A correspondent? What do you mean?"

"I mean that she got a letter from him this morning."

"From a man called Wax?"

"Just so. How slow of comprehension you are to-day, child!"

"But that can't be!" said Florence, wildly. "That was her first husband, and he is dead. She told me so herself."

Mrs. Ripon got up from her chair, understanding nothing as yet, but infected by the other's excitement.

"First husband? Dead? You are talking madness, child! In God's name, calm yourself, and tell me what you mean."

"But I promised not to speak!" said Florence, desperately.

"You *must* speak, if you know anything—and it is evident that you do. Having said so much, you must say more. Do you want to help to hush up what may be a crime?"

Florence stared back at her with wide eyes and working features, her two hands still full of the red and black berries with which she had been busy.

"It was to Louis that I promised not to speak," she said after a moment of strained thought. "Yes, I suppose I ought to tell you."

And in rapid sentences, rendered short and jerky by the excitement that shook her, she gave Mrs. Ripon

the substance of the disclosures made to her by Corrie that June day in London.

"And she admitted positively that she had been married to this man?"

"Positively. After the first moment, she did not even attempt to deny."

"But then——" began Mrs. Ripon, and stopped short, as though frightened at her own thought. For a few moments the two women stared into each other's eyes without speaking.

Suddenly Florence shook her head.

"It can't be," she said with an effort. "There must be some mistake. She told me he had been killed in that accident."

Just then she remembered Corrie's face as she had seen it that morning, and felt a fresh shock of doubt. Was this the explanation of that strange perturbation?

"There may be other people called Wax," she said aloud; "relations, perhaps. What was the Christian name?" she added sharply. "Did Louis mention that? Not Philip?"

"I believe it was Philip."

And again the two women looked at each other.

"It is plain that I must speak to Louis the moment he gets back," said Mrs. Ripon, after another long pause, speaking now in something more like her usual business-like tone. "There is something here that requires clearing up, and we owe it to *her*, as well as to *him*, to dispel all mystery. What a bother he should have gone to town to-day!"

There was the sound of wheels on the gravel as she spoke. As though with the same thought in their

minds, they both turned expectantly to the window, just in time to see Sir Louis spring from the dog-cart and enter the house.

"He has missed his train, after all," remarked Mrs. Ripon quietly. "I told him it would be so."

She kissed the girl quickly, and went out without another word, and Florence, flinging on to the table the berries, which she had still been holding without knowing it, snatched up her hat and jacket, and fled from the house she had entered but half an hour ago, confused and shaken, and understanding only that, whatever might now be coming, her place was not there. As she put on her gloves, she wondered to see some tiny blood drops on her palms; but it did not occur to her that they were the marks left by the thorny twigs which, during the last few minutes, she had been holding in so convulsive a clutch.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN EXIT.

When, on the day of the great railway accident, the news of which had put half Melbourne into mourning, Philip Wax crawled with bruised hands and bleeding forehead from under the wreck of the carriage he had occupied, he had assuredly never imagined that he was being preserved from death in order to live to be the husband of a baronet's wife, for to this proud but paradoxical position he had now actually attained. In the very first moment, to say the truth, he was not entirely clear in his mind as to whether he really had been preserved or not—whether this lurid scene of mingled midnight-blackness, and redly-glowing torches—rendered hideous by every imaginable variety of groan, pitched in every imaginable key—did indeed belong to Mother Earth, or not rather to that deeply situated region beyond the grave, in which—supposing, for argument's sake, that it really existed—he might reasonably expect to find a place prepared for himself. Having, as his faculties cleared, decided in favour of the first of these suppositions, his next step was to do what every one does under these circumstances, namely, to feel himself all over. Actually, not a bone broken! Pools

of blood all around, severed limbs, rags of flesh spiked on splintered wood, yet his only injury a gash in the forehead, such a cut as might be got any day at cricket! What meant this heaving mass of clothing at the bottom of the embankment, on which a fitful ray of the torchlight now fell, with here a human arm protruding stiffly, and there a boot distinctly outlined —all the more appalling for not being quite motionless. Were there actually bodies under those clothes? And this thing at his feet with a human shape, but without a face—could this be that chatty young man who had been in the middle of such a capital anecdote when the shock came?

"They'll never get them properly disentangled," was Mr. Wax's reflection, as he looked down on his mangled fellow-travellers; and at that moment he saw his chance as in a flash. It had been with the object of evading some unpleasantly sharp detectives that he had entered this very train;—how gain his end better than by causing himself to be reckoned among the victims of the catastrophe?

Philip Wax, though more or less of a scoundrel, was quick of resolution and steady of nerves. It took him but a few minutes to change clothes with the faceless man beside him—a manipulation which, in the midst of the surrounding chaos, it was easy to effect unobserved—and it took him but another five minutes to slink away into the unbroken blackness that lay beyond the railway embankment. By daylight he was far from the scene of the disaster. After that, matters were considerably simplified by the contents of the chatty young man's purse, which he had found in the trouser-pocket. With this aid he was

able to gain a distant country town, which harboured him in safety for many months. Then followed a year or two of wanderings and of hand-to-mouth living, until at last his astute spirit told him that the term of his exile was reached. A less perfect swindler might have thought that there could be nothing more dangerous than a return to the spot where the fraud had been committed, but Mr. Wax had had some practice in these matters, and his instinct told him that Melbourne would be the only place where he would *not* be looked for, even supposing that he was being looked for at all; and, accordingly, to Melbourne he went. His calculations proved correct. Without having taken any further precautions than altering his name, and growing a beard, the ex-clerk lived a contented and unmolested life for close upon two years, under the very noses of the same officials who had once been so hot upon his scent. He had always been great at figures—as some of his employers found to their cost—and it was chiefly by giving instructions in book-keeping to the youthful sons of mercantile houses—also by occasionally procuring them money-loans behind the paternal back—that he now succeeded in earning a relatively honest living. One of his pupils it was who had been the destined instrument from whose lips he had heard the report of his supposed widow's re-marriage; for since their return from England in the June of this year, both Mrs. Carter and Cissy had been talking so loudly of their former governess's good fortune that in time it penetrated the entire circle of their acquaintance, to which, as Providence would have it, this particular youth's family happened to belong.

A remark dropped had been enough to put Mr. Wax on the track, and a few judicious inquiries ended by enlightening him fully, just as a little reflection pointed out to him the proper course to pursue under the circumstances. The idea of claiming his wife never even entered into his head—that would indeed be killing the goose with the golden eggs. Clearly there was only one sensible thing to do, namely, to reveal to her alone the fact of his existence, and by threatening to disclose himself, to frighten her into sending him money. From what he had seen of Corrie during their few months of married life, he saw no reason to suppose that she would not fall in with this proposal, and, if properly managed, the arrangement ought to enable him to live free from care to the natural term of his days.

It was in accordance with this idea that Mr. Wax took an early passage for England, and, having made the requisite inquiries, had decided on making use of Lady Hepburne's London dressmaker as the vehicle of correspondence. His knowledge, both of the world and of dressmakers, told him that the request of forwarding a letter would not be considered unusual, but not even his knowledge of the world could warn him of the unfortunate juncture at which the missive would reach Corrie's hands.

It was not till long after that Lady Hepburne's guests knew exactly what it was that was going on around them. But, although weeks and weeks passed before the truth transpired, at the moment every one felt vaguely that "something" was in the air. On his return from the station, Sir Louis had been closeted with his sister for nearly half an hour,

after which some one had met him on the way to his wife's room, looking "more like his spook than himself," as the lady in question put it. On the same afternoon it was announced that Lady Hepburne was too ill to leave her apartments, and within the next twelve hours the assembled guests had, in response to a polite hint, cleared off the premises.

What had passed at that second interview no one but Sir Louis and Corrie ever knew in detail, nor by what means, whether threats or appeals, he had induced her to confess the truth and produce the suspected letter. It is more than likely that the hurry of events, and the still-all-too-fresh perturbation of her mind—for once in her life she was really nonplussed—had something to do with her surrender. Bigamy, indeed, had not figured in her intended programme—for she had honestly believed her scoundrel of a husband to be dead—but yet it is just conceivable that, if she had been given time to recover from the shock of the discovery and to arrange for herself some plan of action, she might—in consideration of what was at stake—have attempted to deny the past. The probability is that she did not think the game safe enough to be worth playing. Be all this as it may, the fact remained that within an hour of his return from the station, Sir Louis was in full possession of all the points of the case.

The position thus abruptly disclosed would have been well-nigh unbearable, even to the husband who up to this morning had been cursing his fetters, if it had not been for one thing, and that was Corrie's own attitude in the matter. On that first day, indeed, she remained too deeply crushed even to attempt to lift

her head, but by next morning already she looked almost like her usual self. A single night's rest had sufficed to steady her excellent nerves. Having, so to speak, taken the measure of the situation, her incurably elastic nature had once more begun to assert itself. A more sensitive, or, let us say, less practical woman, knowing what she now knew, would have flung everything from her, and rushed from the scene in a mixture of horror and shame. Not so Corrie. The first unavoidable phase of perplexity being passed, she understood that, by keeping her head, she might yet manage to save something from the wreck of her good fortunes. Neither horror nor shame came near her. She was desperately disappointed, of course, but she was not really angry with anybody, not even with her worthless husband, since, after all, it wasn't his fault that he hadn't been killed in the accident. Not that anything would induce her to go back to him, as she announced from the first.

"And he wouldn't thank me for it either," she explained to Mrs. Ripon. "From the moment I cease to be Lady Hepburne he has no further use for me."

Her last interview with Sir Louis was the most friendly that had taken place since the days of their betrothal, and was marked, moreover, by a certain brisk, business-like air, which very successfully veiled the embarrassments of the situation. It was Corrie herself who had insisted on this interview. Sir Louis would have preferred to make the proposals he contemplated through his man of business, but Corrie declared that she meant to be her own man of business.

"Nobody ever looks after your interests as you do yourself," she observed, almost cheerfully to Sir Louis, in the course of their conference. "Of course, you're not bound to do anything for me, but, of course, I know that you will do something," she added, with an engaging smile.

"Naturally," said Sir Louis, looking at her with a strange mixture of distaste and compassion. After all, the wretched position she was in was not *all* her own fault, and besides, it was impossible to help admiring her pluck under the circumstances. Altogether he had never before felt so leniently disposed towards her as now that he knew he was going to get rid of her for ever.

"It is—it is self-evident," he stammered, far more ill at ease than she was, "that having got used to a certain amount of comfort, you should not feel it possible to return to——"

"To pauperism," she finished readily. "I thought your sense of justice would point that out to you."

"As for the investment of the capital which I wish to settle on you——"

But here she shook her head decisively.

"No capital, if you please; I have thought over the matter, and I know I shouldn't be able to keep it safe from Philip. Besides, I'm not quite sure that I mightn't do something foolish with it myself. Let it rather be an annuity—a pension, or whatever you like to call it," she added, with just a touch of bitterness in her laugh.

"As you like," hastily agreed Sir Louis, inwardly marvelling at the stuff of which some women are made. "I had thought of three hundred pounds——"

"That's what I have been spending lately on my frocks," broke in Corrie, with a deprecating smile.

"Four hundred, then, by all means."

"Five hundred would be such a much rounder sum"—and the smile grew more insinuating. "You know that you would scarcely miss it."

"Yes, yes—five hundred, or six hundred, if you like," said Sir Louis, recklessly. He would almost have been ready to say six thousand if that could have brought about the end of the interview.

At the last moment he took fright, for she had become suddenly thoughtful, looking at him with unwonted earnestness. "Surely she is not going to lapse into sentiment at the eleventh hour?" he said to himself, apprehensively. But what Corrie said, on opening her lips, was—

"How about the jewels?"

"Everything that is not family jewels you can of course keep."

"Even the diamond *revière?*"

"Certainly."

She heaved a deep-felt sigh of relief.

It was not until the carriage which was to take to the station the person still addressed by the footman as "her ladyship"—though known to himself as well as to herself to be plain Mrs. Wax—had disappeared from sight, that the oppression of the last few days began to lift from Sir Louis's bewildered spirits. He could not have said what instinct it was which sent him straight to his mother's side, not to explain to her what had happened—she would not have understood him, had he tried—but to fondle her thin hand and gaze with yearning tenderness into the brown eyes,

to whose mild depths there had lately been creeping back some of the restlessness of former days, a little of that old anxiety which seemed ever waiting, ever listening for something—perchance, for the first cry of the infant which was to bear into another generation the name of Hepburne, and whose gift she would not yet believe that Heaven had denied.

Meanwhile, on the platform of the country-side station was being enacted the last scene of the drama, or comedy—whichever it ought rightfully to be called—in which he had been elected to play a prominent part. Scarcely had Corrie alighted than she found herself face to face with Florence Crossley, likewise in travelling-dress.

At sight of her Florence flushed scarlet and drew back. It had been in order to be out of the way of coming events that she had decided to pay a long-deferred visit in the neighbouring county—and now this meeting upset her carefully-arranged plans. But there was no escape. Last time it had been Corrie who had drawn back, this time, on the contrary, she came forward, holding out her hand and even faintly smiling.

"What a lucky chance!" she said, dragging the girl into the entrance of the tiny waiting-room. "I was just wondering how I should manage to say good-bye to you, and also to offer my congratulations," she added, lower.

"What do you mean?" faltered Florence.

"I mean that I've had my turn, and now you're going to have yours."

"Don't speak like that—let me go!" said Flor-

ence, striving to free her arm from the clasp of those small, tenacious hands.

Corrie gazed at her in genuine surprise.

"Why, what are you so put out about? Surely it's *I* who ought to be put out, not you. Since I'm going away out of your life for ever, you might at least wish me good-bye."

"Good-bye," murmured Florence, with a pang of pity which brought a sudden softening of the voice. She felt unexpectedly compunctious, almost as though she had been striking a person who is down. "I am sorry—very sorry for you," she said earnestly.

"Whether you are or not, it's nice of you to say it. Why should we part enemies? It wasn't that I meant to do *you* any harm, you know, only that I meant to do myself good. I've failed, worse luck," she added, with the ghost of a sigh, "and now I'm paying the penalty. Don't think of me too hardly if you can, when once you are settled at Stonefield."

"That can never be," said Florence, with flaming cheeks and darkening eyes. "He is too angry with me."

Corrie gave a slight and peculiarly expressive twitch to her right shoulder.

"A man's anger! And against a woman! Bless your heart, is that all you know about them? Of course, he will require a little time to discover his own mind, and a margin will also have to be left for the nine days' wonder to cool down in; but if you're not settled at Stonefield by this day two years, then my name isn't Hepburne—that is to say, Farthingall, no —what *is* my name, by-the-by?—I suppose I mean

Wax—provided, of course, that you don't take to playing providence again," she added, with a quizzical and not unfriendly little side-glance.

Florence tried to say something, but could not immediately speak. There followed a long silence.

During the last few minutes a handful of travellers had been gathering to await the London train, rustic travellers with battered straw hats and shawls drawn around their shoulders, whose appearance portended no danger of invasion of the first-class waiting-room. On the small platform a sort of miniature bustle was in growth.

"And you?" Florence managed at last to say. "What are you going to do? I wonder you can bear it so well."

"Do you? If there was any use in breaking down, you may be sure that I would do so; that's my way of taking things. The game's up, and there's nothing for it but to begin over again. Don't look startled; I don't mean having two husbands again, but beginning to look out for some other piece of good luck. Something generally turns up; as I always say, it all depends on keeping one's eyes open. Isn't that my train? You're not coming London way, are you? Then this is good-bye, indeed. I shall probably try America this time; it's a bigger field than England. I'm glad I've seen you, for I really liked you all the time, mind you; and remember, please, that I don't grudge you your good fortune."

And before Florence had realized what was coming, Corrie had bent towards her and implanted a quick little kiss on her hot cheek, to which, in

her surprise, she neither offered resistance nor response.

In another few minutes she stood alone on the platform, looking after the London train, from somewhere about the middle of which a white handkerchief was being waved out of the window of a first-class compartment, while a fair and ever diminishing head continued to nod a friendly farewell from out of the dim distance. And as she looked she wondered, without understanding. Grateful though she was to this woman for bearing her misfortunes so lightly, this very light-heartedness was a thing almost impossible for her to believe in. To such an earnest and almost over-fervent nature as hers it could not be given to grasp the mingled *insouciance* and optimism of that fair-haired adventuress with the lawyer's head on the siren's form, who, with the true spirit of her class, was setting her face hopefully towards another continent in search for fresh adventures—possibly of a fresh husband. Had she known of the six hundred a year which had been secured only this morning, as well as the *rivière* safely packed in the travelling-bag, the problem of Corrie's fortitude might possibly have appeared to her easier of solution. As it was, she only wondered how, despising this woman as she did, she could yet not wholly hate her.

As a turn on the line hid the vanishing train from view, Florence turned slowly back towards the rustic station-house. Instinctively her eyes sought the hill-line on the horizon, and in the same moment she became aware that, against her own better judgment, her heart had leapt up gladly. Could it be that the happiness which she had wilfully flung aside was

once more to be laid in her hand? That black monster which she had just watched hurrying away out of sight on wings of smoke, was that, indeed, the past that was over and done with, and was it at the foot of those well-known hills that the future lay?

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